

The Lasallian Tradition and the Liberal Arts

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It is an honor for me to have been invited to participate in this celebration and to address the question of how the liberal arts relate to the Lasallian tradition. That is a subject worthy of discussion in this setting. Throughout the 125 years of its history St. Mary's College has enjoyed a reputation for leadership in liberal arts education. For 120 of those 125 years St. Mary's has been under the direction of the sons of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, commonly called the Christian Brothers. It just so happens that today, April 7, is the 269th anniversary of the saint's death and the day assigned as his feast in the Church calendar. Let us hope that what is said here will not cause the Holy Founder to turn over in his reliquary.

This invitation is not only an honor for me personally but it is an honor for Manhattan College to be represented on this occasion and in this way. Our two institutions have a parallel history. Manhattan College received its charter from the State of New York in 1863, the same year that St. Mary's was founded. Determined, however, to be *numero uno* we date our foundation from 1853, and so we had our 125th celebration ten years ago. Brother Justin, your first Brother President, came out here from New York in 1868 and returned to us to become the fourth president of Manhattan. I suppose that makes us sister institutions founded by the Brothers, whatever that means in terms of sexual identity and sibling rivalry.

The topic before us is a formidable one in view of the complexity of its component elements: the Lasallian tradition on the one hand, and the liberal arts on the other. Both of these terms can mean many different things. Taken in a narrow sense there may be little historical evidence to relate the two; it is only as they are broadly understood that we can begin to see a positive connection. For that reason my model in the first part of this presentation will be the young Jeremiah, the pessimistic Jeremiah of Chapter 1, the Jeremiah determined to tear down and uproot before he could rebuild and replant; my model in the second will be the mature Jeremiah, the optimistic Jeremiah of Chapter 31, the Jeremiah envisioning a new covenant to replace the old.

“The Young Jeremiah”

The young Jeremiah understands both the liberal arts and the Lasallian tradition in their contextual historical sense. To him, the term “liberal arts” refers to a traditional and more or less well defined curriculum at the college level in those disciplines that are often referred to collectively as the humanities. That, I presume, is what the term “liberal arts” means concretely to the academic community here at St. Mary's. The Lasallian tradition refers to the religious and educational achievement of John Baptist de La Salle as it has been transmitted and interpreted in

the more than 300 year history of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. The young iconoclastic Jeremiah maintains that the Lasallian tradition has been at odds with the liberal arts through most of its history.

John Baptist de La Salle, born in Reims in 1651, not an aristocrat but the son of a relatively well-to-do magistrate and a member of the influential upper bourgeoisie, was himself the product of what passed in his day for a solid foundation in the liberal arts. In 1661, after four years of elementary schooling at the hands of private tutors, he entered the Collège des Bons-Enfants, the school of liberal arts in the University of Reims. Only ten years old at the time, he was expected to be able to read, in the original Latin of course, the easier classics such as the plays of Terrence - in which we find expressed the humanist ideal: *homo sum et nil humanum a me alienum puto* - the letters of Cicero, and the eclogues of Vergil. By the time he was fifteen he was into Plato and Pindar in the original Greek. Then followed two years of Aristotelian philosophy based on the *Organon*, the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the *Physics*, and the *Metaphysics*.

In 1669, at the age of eighteen, De La Salle was awarded the degree of Master of Arts. The diploma is preserved under glass in the archive of the Brothers' motherhouse in Rome. So, for that matter are the remains of De La Salle himself. But not in the same place or under the same glass.

I suppose there are some who would wish that today's teenagers could be educated through some such curriculum. But there are notable gaps, even from the point of view of what today would be considered essential to a solid foundation in the liberal arts or the humanities. There was no provision for the study of history, for example, and the contemporary world in general was excluded as a fit subject for serious study. None of the literature of France's golden age would have penetrated the Bons-Enfants: not the *Pleiade*, not Montaigne, Malherbe, Corneille, Racine, Molière, or La Fontaine and certainly not Rabelais. Aristotle was the only philosopher studied in depth, and whatever mathematics and science was taught came out of that philosophical matrix. The philosophy of Descartes, a near-contemporary, was excluded by official decree as altogether too subversive of both reason and faith.

In 17th century France such a foundation in the liberal arts was available only to the elite. It was intended for students preparing to pursue advanced university studies in philosophy, theology, medicine, and law. Only the intellectually elite could meet the rigorous demands of the courses. Only the wealthy could afford it, not that the tuition was very high (it was in fact rather nominal as is still the case in most European universities). It was rather that only the sons of the wealthy could afford the time and the leisure to complete the courses, without the pressure of having to go to work at an early age. Money could be a factor in terms of the lifestyle of university students: their manners, their dress, their family and social connections, and their leisure activities.

De La Salle built on this foundation in the liberal arts to complete, over another ten-year period, the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Theology. He was a full-time resident student of theology at the Sorbonne in Paris for only a very short period - eighteen months to be exact. The death of his parents forced him to complete his theological education on a part-time basis at the

school of theology in Reims, dividing his time and energy between academic pursuits on the one hand and his duties as head of the household and canon of the cathedral chapter on the other.

We know from contemporary sources that De La Salle's theology professors were rigidly orthodox, traditional in their methodology, and tolerant neither of imaginative theological thinking nor of independent scholarly research. The emphasis was on note-taking, memorization, and the ability in oral dialectics to defend traditional theological theses against all possible objections. There was, for example, no researched or written dissertation required for the advanced degrees. For these reasons it might be safe to say that De La Salle never became much of a theologian in the professional sense. All his life long he avoided theological controversy, an impossibility then and now for any practicing and committed theologian; he insisted that his Brothers steer clear of theology altogether.

However that may be, it was precisely in 1680, at the very moment when De La Salle's own education in the liberal arts and theology culminated in the doctorate that he himself was entering into a period of personal conversion. The world of the poor was opening up to him in his initial contacts with the bedraggled and uncouth schoolmasters recruited by Adrien Nyel. Little by little he would be drawn into the world of the poor where, after a period of intense physical revulsion and spiritual soul-searching, he would discover his vocation as a Founder. In the process, as Brother Yves Poutet has expressed it, he would shed the trappings of his own education in the liberal arts, discarding it as if it were an ill-fitting garment.

In this respect the conversion experience of De La Salle in his encounter with the poor was rather the opposite of the experience of Ignatius Loyola a century and a half earlier. Ignatius had been an unlettered professional soldier. Following his conversion, Ignatius determined to seek a university education in Spain and later in Paris, where the Society of Jesus was formed. The same zeal for the Gospel that led Ignatius and the Jesuits to embrace the higher learning led De La Salle and his Brothers to turn away from it.

For this reason the subjects studied in the Christian Schools of De La Salle were uniformly practical. The Latin classics were set aside in favor of practical exercises in French. The reading selections were chosen for their edifying content rather than their literary value. The writing exercises were likewise practical: business letters, invoices, receipts, and accounts. Discipline was insisted upon, and instruction was given in the social conventions and good manners of the time. The aim was to help the sons of the artisans and the poor make their way in the world that they would have to face when they left school at the age of ten or twelve. Learning for its own sake, liberal arts in that sense, was a luxury that the clientele of the Christian Schools simply could not afford.

Even this practical schooling, in De La Salle's vision of faith, was not an end in itself. For him the Christian School was an instrument of salvation, a means whereby the sons of the poor would have the Gospel preached to them. The meditations that De La Salle wrote for the Brothers to ponder during their annual retreat are totally oriented to this view. In these texts he tells the Brothers that they are ambassadors of Jesus Christ, dispensers of his mysteries, even that they are the successors of the Apostles in their catechetical ministry and that their mission is to make of their pupils disciples of Jesus Christ.

In the school, the day began with morning prayer and a practical exhortation by the Brother on a religious theme. Lessons would be interrupted on the hour and the half hour to recall the presence of God. The catechism lesson was considered the most important of the day and the one that required the most careful preparation. Religious instruction was not limited to rote memorization alone; the aim was conviction, with great emphasis on the practical value of vigilance and good example. The ordinary school subjects were given their proper place, of course, as the success of the schools testifies. But the entire enterprise was deliberately geared to formation in practical everyday Christian living.

This commitment to practical schooling as an instrument of evangelization extended to the more advanced and specialized educational institutions that De La Salle founded in his lifetime. On three different occasions he attempted to found training centers for lay teachers, none of which lasted very long. The aim was to provide student teachers in the shortest possible time with basic knowledge and pedagogical skills. For a brief period during the Paris years there was a Sunday Academy associated with the novitiate house. Intended for late teenagers who had to work during the week, this program also emphasized practical subjects such as geometry and mechanical drawing, followed always by a lengthy period of religious instruction.

Of more lasting significance was the boarding school that was opened when the motherhouse was moved from Paris to Saint Yon, a suburb of Rouen in Normandy. This was a pay school intended for bourgeois lads who wanted to advance their education beyond the elementary level, but had no particular desire or reason to enter the university. This program became quite popular and lasted right up until the dispersal of the Brothers during the French Revolution. A description of the curriculum from 1774 tells the story – “Everything a young man can learn, with the exception of Latin: commerce, banking, military science, architecture, and mathematics.” The exclusion of Latin meant excluding the liberal arts.

Brother Clair Battersby, in his life of De La Salle, considers the Founder of the Brothers as a pioneer in professional education, “at a time when there existed a gaping void in the educational system between the elementary schools on the one hand and the classical colleges on the other; when the rising middle class, interested in trade and industry rather than in the academic pursuits of leisured gentlemen were unprovided for.” Battersby then cites several French historians of education who credit De La Salle with being the originator of organized technical and professional education in France. To this day the educational efforts of the Brothers in France that do beyond the elementary level are concentrated for the most part in the technical schools.

In sum, we might say that the evidence we have concerning the policies and practices established by John Baptist de La Salle at the origins of the Institute of the Brothers yields very little to support an educational theory based on the liberal arts, understood as a curriculum devoted to liberal learning for its own sake. Rather, the opposite seems to be the case.

It was not until the Brothers came to this country in the mid-nineteenth century that we can see any concentrated effort to adapt the Lasallian tradition to the field of higher education where the cultivation of the liberal arts might be appropriate and necessary. The first Brothers arrived in the United States from France in 1848. Within five years the institution that eventually became Manhattan College was already in operation. In 1855 Christian Brothers’ College in St. Louis

was empowered to grant degrees. La Salle College in Philadelphia and Manhattan College received their state charters in 1863. In 1868 the Brothers “called to the Pacific” took over Saint Mary’s that had been founded five years earlier, the event we celebrate today. By the end of the nineteenth century five more Brothers’ colleges were chartered: two of these, Christian Brothers’ College in Memphis, founded in 1872, and the College of Santa Fe, founded in 1874, continue to operate as colleges today.

It would be heartening on an occasion such as this to claim that, with the opening of these institutions, the Lasallian tradition had been effectively grafted onto the long-standing tradition of the liberal arts. In a sense the graft was made. The Brothers' colleges in the United States in nineteenth century were nothing but small liberal arts colleges with a curriculum dominated, as was the expectation at the time, by the very Latin and Greek classics that De La Salle had abandoned irrelevant to the clientele of his schools.

With no Institute tradition in liberal learning, such as prevailed in many clerical institutes, notably among the Jesuits, and with no opportunity of formal university study themselves, the Brothers had to scramble to develop the learning necessary to maintain quality at the college level. And scramble they did. By dint of personal study for the most part, many of them became recognized, locally and nationally, as distinguished college administrators, philosophers, literary men, and writers, especially on educational subjects. This was a sort of golden age for liberal arts education [or the Brothers in the United States, at least for those involved in the colleges.

Unprecedented as was this excursion of the American Brothers into the field of higher education, the reasons for it remained traditionally Lasallian and pragmatic: the educational needs of the immigrant generations of Catholics. A college degree was necessary if Catholics were to break into the fields of law and medicine, engineering and teaching. At the same time it was important that such an education be had in an atmosphere where the Catholic faith of the students and their immigrant origin would not be the object of attack or ridicule. Furthermore, faced with the need to build a native clergy, the American church needed colleges where there was a better chance of directing priestly candidates to the diocesan seminary rather than to the novitiate of a clerical order.

For these reasons the American Brothers felt justified in trying to combine the Lasallian tradition of a practical response to an educational need with a curriculum rooted in the classics and the liberal arts. The noble experiment came to an abrupt and tragic end at the turn of the century. In 1897, despite the respectful representations of the American Brothers, and the earnest entreaties of the American bishops, the French superiors rescinded all dispensations from the letter of the *Rule* and forbade the teaching of Latin, thus excluding what was then the core of the liberal arts curriculum. To drive the point home more forcibly, the Brother Presidents of the colleges, together with some of the best scholars, were reassigned to teaching duties in the elementary schools in France and Egypt.

As a result some of the Brothers’ academies and colleges had to close. Those that managed to survive did so by shifting the emphasis from the classics and liberal arts to science and engineering, business and teacher training. The adaptation was certainly more in line with the tradition inherited from De La Salle. It was also more congenial to the spirit of an emerging

technological age. The voice of John Dewey was being heard in the land, and so was President Eliot of Harvard. It is ironic that by the time that Latin was restored to the Brothers' schools through the intervention of Pope Pius XI in 1923, Latin and Greek were no longer considered essential to a quality education, even in the humanities.

Whether or not it was connected with the restoration of Latin, the decade and a half that followed saw an expansion of the Brothers' efforts in the field of higher education. In 1922 Manhattan College had already moved from under the elevated tracks on upper Broadway to its present site in the Riverdale section of the Bronx. In 1928 Saint Mary's moved from Oakland to Moraga. In 1930 the Brothers opened a full-time university scholasticate affiliated with Catholic University in Washington. In 1933 the Brothers in St. Louis' took over the direction of Saint Mary's College in Winona, Minnesota.

The physical expansion represented by these developments necessitated a parallel commitment of manpower. Brothers began to be sent on a regular basis to outside universities to study for advanced degrees, initially on a part-time basis but increasingly as full-time students. The preferred fields of study were the natural sciences and the liberal arts, with Brothers earning doctorates for the first time in subject areas such as philosophy, history, classical or modern languages and, eventually, theology. All of this helped to inaugurate what may be described as the second golden age of liberal arts in the American adaptation of the Lasallian tradition. By a happy coincidence it was just at this time that Robert Hutchins in Chicago and the Great Books program at St. John's College in Annapolis were spearheading a drive nationwide to put the liberal arts back at the center of higher education. The new generation of Brothers, thoroughly trained in the liberal arts and the Lasallian tradition as well, was in the best possible position to understand and to espouse this movement. World War II, with its decreased enrollments and stop-gap military programs, provided the break in routine that gave the Brothers the leisure to reexamine the traditional curriculum and to plan creative ways to make the humanities a vital force in the curriculum once the war would be over.

All of the Brothers' colleges profited by this chance for a new beginning. Two in particular, St. Mary's and Manhattan - your place and mine - introduced distinctive programs in the liberal arts that attracted nationwide attention. Saint Mary's opted for a modified version of the Great Books program, with philosophy as the dominant influence and seminars as the preferred methodology. Manhattan chose as the theme for its program the Christian civilization of the West, with history as the integrating factor. Academic theology was required in both programs as a necessary basis for a true humanism.

Despite their differences in organization and requirements, both programs were wholeheartedly dedicated to learning for its own sake, to the education of the human person prior to and more fundamental than professional training in a specialized field. Despite differences in method, both programs minimized textbooks and surveys in favor of an in-depth study of the great classics, in translation if necessary, including authors usually excluded from Catholic institutions at that time.

The euphoria created in this rarefied academic atmosphere was reflected in an address given in 1951 at Manhattan College by the great French philosopher, Jacques Maritain, on the occasion of

the 300th anniversary of the birth of John Baptist de La Salle. His talk could well have been entitled "The Lasallian Tradition and the Liberal Arts." Speaking of the Brothers, he said:

From the very start they have understood that as concerns the working classes ... education must equip youth with a genuine and efficient professional training and the means of making a living. And they have understood at the same time that the formation of the soul and of the intellect, the bringing up of man as man, remains the highest and indispensable aim of education. That integration of the practical and the theoretical, of vocational preparation and the cultivation of the mind - with the implied general enlightenment, ability to think and judge by oneself, and orientation toward wisdom - that integration is natural for them, and they work it out spontaneously, because they are neither idealists despising matter nor technocrats despising disinterested knowledge ...

That is a marvelous tribute. It sums up very well the rhetoric in our catalogues and even, perhaps, what some of us are earnestly striving to do. It might be well at this point to quit while we are ahead and let Maritain have the last word. But the young Jeremiah in me won't let go. That would be merely an exercise in celebratory rhetoric, if we did not ask ourselves how real is the integration between liberal and technical education with which Maritain credits us. Is it, in fact, integration that we have achieved, or rather something between peaceful coexistence and an armed truce?

Look, for example, at the rocky history of the innovative liberal arts programs introduced into the Brothers' colleges, yours and mine especially, after World War II. From the very beginning there was resistance from the Brothers and lay colleagues steeped in Lasallian practicality. The opposition at Saint Mary's, as I understand it, came from the partisans of art and architecture, with perhaps a bit of football mania somewhere in the background. At Manhattan, besides the barely tolerant attitude of the engineering and business faculty toward the arts, there was a well-organized cadre of supporters of Senator McCarthy who were sincere in their conviction that any program with the word "liberal" in it had to be part of a Communist plot. In the situation, the advocates of the liberal arts were not inclined to invoke the Lasallian tradition to bolster their case.

It would be heartening to be able to say that things have improved since then. As a young man Jeremiah would not have to invoke the lamentations of William Bennett or Allan Bloom to suggest that the liberal arts have fallen on hard times. The pragmatists and the technocrats have carried the day, not only in the Brothers' schools but everywhere. In the intervening years since Maritain spoke so glowingly about integrating liberal learning with Lasallian practicality, the pursuit of the trivium has been replaced by trivial pursuit; the very word "literacy" is now more commonly tied to computers than to literature.

It is no secret that, since the sixties, enrollment in liberal arts programs has been declining steadily. Many small liberal arts colleges have had to close; elsewhere, heavy doses of career oriented courses are grafted onto the arts curriculum to help market a product that not many want to buy. Elective courses have so multiplied and grades become so inflated, that it is quite possible for a clever student to get a college degree without ever getting an education.

“The Older Jeremiah”

But that is enough of the young Jeremiah. To put it another way, I presume that I was invited here, not to bury the liberal arts but to praise them. It is time then to turn to the mature Jeremiah, the Jeremiah of Chapter 31 with the vision of a new covenant. If we are to establish a new covenant between the Lasallian tradition and the liberal arts, we must, as Jeremiah himself suggests, abandon the literal and historical record of that tradition to get to the heart of it. And there, I think, we find a way to build and to plant.

For all of its orientation to the practical, the Lasallian tradition from the beginning has had an almost awesome respect for the student as a human person, called to be a child of God. The Christian Schools of De La Salle have been communities more than institutions, where persons grow to human maturity as Christians in interpersonal interaction and relationships. However career-oriented the curriculum or standardized the methodology, Lasallian education was centered on the fundamental human and religious values that make life worth living. If the humanities in the narrow sense entered that tradition only late in the day, humanity in its best and widest sense has been there all along.

In this connection it should not be forgotten that the educational achievement of John Baptist de La Salle was in its day both innovative and counter-cultural. In seventeenth century France you received either a classical education in the liberal arts or none at all. And you had to be able to afford it. If you were poor, or wanted to master skills that would provide a better livelihood, the existing schools were of no help. De La Salle created a network of gratuitous schools where a practical education of high quality became available for the first time to anybody who wanted it.

Today the situation is in many ways the reverse. Technical and pre-professional education has become so to dominate the educational scene that it might be said that someone like De La Salle is needed to once again provide what is missing. Where to find a popular and readily available educational experience with the emphasis on the human person, the ability to think for oneself, and the value of learning for its own sake? Who better to provide it than the innovative and countercultural inheritors of the Lasallian tradition?

Any attempt, however, to shift the focus in Lasallian education from career orientation to liberal learning will require, as it has in the past, some specific departures from what has been considered traditionally Lasallian. First of all, it is difficult to relate liberal education for its own sake to concern for the poor. Liberal education by its nature is directed to an elite. It is not for everyone: certainly not the intellectually poor, and, although there is no reason to deprive the economically poor of such an opportunity, it most often happens that the economic obstacles become insurmountable. Even the concept of indirect service to the poor, to which leaders trained in the liberal arts might well contribute, cannot be easily accommodated to the pursuit of learning for its own sake.

Another difficulty concerns the integration of academic theology into the liberal arts curriculum. If that study is to be both theological and liberating, that is critical and intellectually honest, it would be necessary to depart from the explicit directives of the Founder, exemplified in his own conduct, to avoid theological controversy and to adhere unswervingly to the official positions

taken by Rome. The theological component in the arts curriculum cannot possibly function in the same way as the catechesis traditional in the Brother's schools.

Finally, if the liberal arts are to be kept alive within the Lasallian tradition, this can no longer be the task of the Brothers alone, if indeed it ever was. In today's world the Lasallian tradition itself is at least as threatened as the liberal arts. The Brothers have finally come to recognize, in humility and gratitude, we hold no monopoly on the Lasallian tradition, that whatever is valuable in it is the possession and the trust of what we have come to call the Lasallian family. In the case of the survival of the liberal arts in our colleges, it is especially the teaching faculty who are not Brothers that will play the decisive role. "The Brothers have finally come to recognize, in humility and gratitude, we hold no monopoly on the Lasallian tradition, that whatever is valuable in it is the possession of and the trust of what we have come to call the Lasallian family."

There are, I suppose, some who might say that such departures from the historic understanding of the Founder's heritage constitute a betrayal of the Lasallian tradition. That was the attitude of the French superiors in the Latin question. But now, the Lasallian tradition finds its authentic interpretation in the *Declaration* issued in 1967 by the thirty-ninth General Chapter of the Brothers' Institute. In a passage that I never tire of quoting that document even proposes ideals of a liberal education as an apostolic ministry in these terms:

It is apostolic to awaken in students a serious attitude towards life and the conviction of the greatness of man's destiny; it is apostolic to make it possible for them, with intellectual honesty and responsibility, to experience the autonomy of personal thought; it is apostolic to help students use their liberty to overcome their prejudices, preconceived ideas, social pressures, as well as the pressures that come from disintegration within the human person.

The official statement of goals of Saint Mary's College says much the same thing. It reads, in part:

The College seeks to animate all its educational programs with the spirit of the liberal arts. The liberation of mind which is the essence of the liberal arts tradition requires that students in all disciplines develop habits of looking twice, of asking why, of seeking not only facts but fundamental principles ... To help the student become mature and proficient in the ways of knowing is the ultimate goal of this liberal education.

These are two powerful statements. They resonate with the teaching experience of those of us Brothers and colleagues, who have inherited the tradition of the first and second golden age of liberal arts in the Brothers' colleges. There may still be gold in "them thar hills," but the contemporary vogue is for the brass tacks that presumably provide the bread and butter. Prospectors looking for gold seem to have become an anachronism.

Vigor and vigilance, imagination and will, are the qualities that are needed for those of us who want to keep the liberal arts at the center of Lasallian education. In that effort we may have to suffer the fate of Jeremiah. Neither the established powers nor popular wisdom was interested in what he had to say; he was denied a voice in determining policy; he even wound up being thrown into the sewer. When the mature Jeremiah held out hope for a new covenant between God and Israel he had no way of knowing that it would take 600 years for it to come about. Let us hope that we won't have to wait that long for a new covenant between the liberal arts and the Lasallian tradition.