

Lasallian Values in Higher Education

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The topic assigned to these reflections concerns Lasallian values in higher education. To anyone familiar with the history of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools from its seventeenth century origins to its situation in the world today, there are many reasons why it is timely to take a fresh look at the importance of the [De La Salle] Christian Brothers and their educational tradition in our institutions of higher learning. This discussion comes at a time when the Brothers in our schools at every level, but especially in the tertiary institutions, are no longer as predominant among the faculty and administrators as they once were. In fact, it no longer seems possible to think of many of our schools as Brothers' schools; it is more accurate perhaps to call them Lasallian schools. For that reason, in our colleges and universities in particular, there are many among the faculty, students, and staff who seem to feel that the contribution of the Brothers and their Lasallian teaching tradition is an institutional asset that ought not to be lost.

One guarantee that the tradition will be handed on is the continued presence of the Brothers in the university and their individual and corporate commitment to it. But that is not enough. The Brothers realize that we must now make a more conscious effort to share the riches of the Lasallian educational and spiritual tradition with our lay colleagues. The university does not have to be dominated by the Brothers to be distinctively Lasallian. But it is important to be clear about what the Lasallian tradition is and how precisely it might continue to characterize and energize an educational community such as La Salle University.

The adjective Lasallian has come into vogue only in recent years and is already becoming something of a catchword. It seems to me that the only way to break through the cliché and invest the word Lasallian with some kind of concrete meaning is to begin with the person, the achievement, and the vision of John Baptist de La Salle. The Brothers honor him as their Founder, the Catholic Church honors him as a saint and not without reason, has declared him the patron saint of teachers. It might be useful, then, as a background for the discussion, to try to get to know him a little better.

John Baptist de La Salle was born in France in 1651, the oldest son of a well-to-do family, prominent among the upper bourgeoisie of the city of Rheims. His own education followed the system traditional since the middle ages, beginning with the classical literature in the original Greek and Latin, and culminating in two years of Aristotelian philosophy. After graduating from the University College in Rheims at the age of 18 with a Master of Arts degree *summa cum laude*, he went on for graduate study in theology, was ordained a priest, and eventually earned the degree of Doctor of Theology with top honors in 1680.

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At that moment, as a devout 30 year old priest, recently ordained and with first class academic credentials, he had an influential network of family and friends ready to further his prospects for a distinguished career in the Church. It was only a matter of time before he might become a bishop or maybe a cardinal. And so he might have lived and died and then been completely forgotten.

But something happened to change that scenario. The young Father De La Salle suddenly found himself involved with a small group of barely literate young men trying to teach poor boys in the rundown charity schools in his native Rheims. For them, it was a living of sorts, at least until something better might come along. Their leader was an older layman, Adrien Nyel by name. He was a good man, enthusiastic and idealistic, but with little sense of how to run an organization, or how to keep a good thing going once he got it started.

And so it happened, almost by accident, that Father De La Salle gradually assumed the leadership of that nondescript band of lay teachers. At first he helped pay their rent. Then he moved them into a house near his own. When he saw close at hand how uncultured and uneducated they were, he invited them to his home for meals to try to improve their knowledge, their religious practice, and their table manners. Then, much to the shock and chagrin of the family, he decided to bring them into his home to live. Finally, in 1682, he moved with them to a rented house in a deprived neighborhood. From that center, this first community of teachers staffed three parish schools. It was a beginning.

Through all of this, De La Salle himself did not fully realize what was happening. As he himself wrote years later:

God, who guides all things with wisdom and serenity and whose way it is not to force the inclinations of persons, willed to commit me entirely to the development of the schools. He did this in an imperceptible way and over a long period of time so that one commitment led to another in a way that I did not foresee in the beginning.

To appreciate the significance of what this reluctant newcomer on the educational scene was able eventually to achieve, we have to remind ourselves of the school situation in the France of 1680. The university system, which provided a classical education from grade school through to the doctorate, was in place and had been for centuries. But that was accessible, as it had been to De La Salle, only to those who were socially and financially in a position to afford it. Apart from the university schools, the only elementary education available, and that also at a price, was from teachers in what were called the “little schools” who made a living running a school by themselves, usually in their own homes.

As for the poor, nobody much cared. Although the parishes were required to provide charity schools, these schools were poorly run, there was little discipline, attendance was not enforced, the students were unkempt and prone both to lice and vice, the teachers were incompetent and poorly paid, and the school itself might be closed down for long periods at the slightest excuse. Thus De La Salle could write in his *Rule*:

The need for this Institute is very great, because artisans and the poor, being usually little educated, and occupied all day in gaining a livelihood for themselves and their families, cannot give their children the instruction they need, much less a suitable Christian education. It was to procure this advantage for the children of the artisans and the poor, that the Christian schools were established.

But the Institute of the Christian Schools might not have been established at all if De La Salle had not been willing to put his own intellectual gifts and advanced education at the service of those in need. In the process, he created a new type of school system for the elementary education of the poor, a new set of standards that would transform teaching school into a profession and a vocation, a new community of consecrated lay teachers as a new form of religious life in the Church.

To achieve all of this, to enter into the world of the poor with creativity and authenticity, Father De La Salle had to sacrifice all of his personal ambition, his family fortune, his ecclesiastical honors, his comfortable lifestyle, and even his personal reputation. People thought he was crazy. His own family disowned him. The educational authorities of the time had him hailed into court, condemned, and fined because the educational policies he introduced threatened to break down the social barriers of the time. It was unthinkable to give rich and poor the same education in the same classroom, and all for free. In fact, it was against the law.

Then there were the church authorities. Pastors, bishops, and even the Cardinal Archbishop of Paris, hounded De La Salle relentlessly. They could neither understand nor control this persistent innovator who didn't want his Brothers to be priests, who had his own ideas about how to run a school, and how to make the Christian message appealing to those who rarely heard good news of any kind.

De La Salle did not limit his educational vision to gratuitous elementary schools for the poor. He realized that there were other needs. Well trained teachers were high on his list of priorities. On three distinct occasions he was able to establish experimental training schools for lay teachers. Aware that there was not provision at that time for working teenagers to continue their education, De La Salle founded a Sunday program of advanced courses in practical subjects just for them. He opened a boarding school with offerings in advanced technical or pre-professional courses, unavailable, unheard of, and unthinkable in the colleges and universities of the time. He pioneered in what we now call programs in special education for backward students. He opened one of the first institutions in France to specialize in the care and education of young delinquents.

In short, John Baptist de La Salle was not the kind of plastic saint that emerges when, as the Brothers tend to do, he is referred to as "Saint La Salle." True, he was a contemplative of sorts and a penitent in the virtuosic style of seventeenth-century spirituality. But he was also a down-to-earth human being, an effective financial administrator, a creative innovator with the skills and the determination to structure his educational reforms and bring into being a religious community that would guarantee that the work would endure.

The vision of this man has survived for more than 300 years and is alive and well among the Brothers and their lay and clerical colleagues in more than 80 countries all over the world. This

worldwide extension of De La Salle's work has provided opportunities to apply the Founder's vision to new times and new circumstances.

When the Brothers came to this country, for example, they found that the elementary education of the urban poor was already fairly well provided for. The need was rather to provide for the children of the Catholic immigrant generations a more advanced education under Catholic auspices that would give them access to the professions and leadership positions in American society. That meant high schools and academies, of course, but the need was even more urgent for a Catholic presence in the field of higher education. 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.

It was not clear at first that this work was something that the Brothers could or ought to undertake. For one thing, the Jesuits were already conducting colleges in several American cities, a work that seemed better suited to their mission to train and educate a Catholic intellectual elite. But many bishops seemed to prefer to have the Brothers conduct their colleges, perhaps because the need was so great; perhaps, too, because they feared a Jesuit monopoly, realizing that no single type of college could satisfy all the needs of an American Church coming of age. More specifically, the American bishops, who were trying to develop a native clergy, 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.

It was to answer these needs of an emerging American church that the Brothers in the United States responded wholeheartedly by opening their first college ever. 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. Within twenty years after their arrival from France in 1848, the Brothers had colleges operating in New York, Philadelphia, Memphis, Saint Louis, and San Francisco, literally from coast to coast.

From the beginning, the Brothers brought to the field of higher education their reputation for effective teaching and classroom discipline. But with no training in the classical literature and philosophy that formed the core of the nineteenth-century college curriculum, and with no opportunity of formal university study for 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, classicists, literary men, writers on educational theory, and authors of textbooks.

The extension of the Lasallian tradition into the field of higher education was a distinctive and innovative contribution of the American Brothers to the Lasallian educational enterprise. But the noble experiment of joining the Lasallian tradition to an American college curriculum rooted in the classics came to an abrupt and tragic end at the turn of the century. In 1897, despite the respectful representation of the American Brothers, and the earnest entreaties of the American bishops, the French superiors, convinced that teaching at the college level was a betrayal of the

Lasallian ideal, rescinded all dispensations and reinstated the letter of the *Rule* that since the Founder's time had forbidden the teaching of Latin. This meant that the Brothers could no longer provide what was then an essential element in the curriculum of the liberal arts colleges. To drive the point home more forcibly, the Superiors reassigned the Brother Presidents of the American colleges, together with some of the best classical scholars, to teaching duties in elementary schools in Egypt and in France.

Although some of our colleges had to close, several of them – La Salle and Manhattan among them—managed to survive by shifting the emphasis from the classics and the liberal arts to science and engineering, business and teacher training. This 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 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. Since that time the Brothers' colleges that survived the crisis have expanded and flourished. At present there are in the United States seven institutions² of higher learning operating under the sponsorship of the [De La Salle] Christian Brothers, three of them, including this one, entitled to be called a university.

In this extension of the Lasallian tradition to meet new needs, the Brothers strive to remain faithful to the basic thrust of De La Salle's vision and, at the same time, to be as creative as he was in bringing something distinctive to the field of higher education in this country. Now it is time for the Brothers in our institutions of higher learning to share with our colleagues both the values in the Lasallian vision and the responsibility for their transmission.

Many attempts have been made in recent years to try to identify those values in the tradition derived from De La Salle that characterize and energize a Lasallian institution. Inevitably, some of these values will be shared by comparable institutions as well. But I think it is the mix, the sum total of all of the elements taken together, that creates the distinctive atmosphere in a school that marks it as unmistakably Lasallian. In the time remaining, I would like to try to isolate the values that derive from the Lasallian tradition under four headings: good teaching, association and brotherhood, service of the poor, and religious education.

The first of these values concerns teaching and the person of the teacher. That is where it all began, what triggered De La Salle's interest in education in the first place. He saw very quickly that if the wretched condition of the charity schools were to change, everything would depend on the quality of the teachers. From the very beginning, then, teachers and good teaching have been at the heart of the Lasallian enterprise. De La Salle expected his teachers to be competent and effective, and in that, he was well ahead of his time, especially in schools for the poor. But more than that, he wanted them to be highly motivated, to see that the teacher does not merely work at a job: teachers have a vocation and a mission. De La Salle called his teachers "ambassadors of Jesus Christ and dispensers of his mysteries," not only because they taught religion, but also because their total teaching ministry brought the good news that there is hope for salvation in this world as well as in the next. De La Salle's foundation was the first to give concrete expression to the value of the teaching vocation as worthy of the commitment of one's total self and even for a lifetime.

One of the major contributions of the Brothers to our colleges over the years has been their expertise as teachers. Most of the Brothers honed their teaching skills in assignments to elementary or secondary schools before being assigned to college teaching. The result was that teachers who were not Brothers had ready to hand experienced models of how to be at ease in the classroom, how to be in control without domineering, how to organize complex subject matter in lesson plans, how to communicate it in understandable terms, and how to monitor progress at regular intervals. A high priority on effective teaching would have to continue to be a major value to be cultivated in any Lasallian institution of higher learning.

The value of good teaching cannot be taken for granted in today's world and not even in a Lasallian institution. There is a danger, especially as our colleges adopt the values and standards of the major universities, that teaching be seen less as a vocation and more as a profession, with professional standards of research and publication to be met on the one hand and professional privileges to be jealously guarded on the other. Although it is often pointed out that there need be no conflict between teaching and research; that in the ideal situation, research improves teaching and vice versa; still, in the real world where push all too often comes to shove and values conflict, it is the demands of good teaching that are forced to yield.

Unfortunately, it must be observed that the Brothers themselves are in danger of losing sight of this value in their tradition. While most Brothers want earnestly to preserve our schools and their Lasallian character, fewer and fewer are willing to commit themselves permanently to full-time teaching in the classroom. Brothers are more and more attracted to careers in administration, counseling, campus ministry, and auxiliary services. Indispensable as these functions may be, the Lasallian school will lose an important value if the Brothers themselves are not willing to witness to the unique effectiveness of what happens when a competent and caring teacher comes face to face with students in the classroom.

A second value in the Lasallian tradition derives from the fact that De La Salle did not envision his teachers as functioning in isolation. He realized that to be effective, teaching had to be a corporate and communal exercise. It was a major breakthrough on his part to abandon the model of the single schoolteacher responsible for a parish school. Association in the teaching enterprise was such an essential element in the Lasallian school that from the beginning and still today, association is one of the vows that the Brothers take. Originally limited to the Brothers, the tradition of association is now expanded to help to define and motivate the interrelation between the Brothers and their colleagues in the Lasallian educational institutions.

This profound sense of association for an educational mission led De La Salle and his first disciples to express their relationship to one another in terms of brotherhood. Although De La Salle himself was a priest, he never wanted the Brothers to be anything but Brothers, brothers to one another and brothers to their students. That was why the early Brothers were forbidden to learn or teach Latin. The exclusion of the priesthood kept the Brothers totally committed to teaching and out of the mainstream of ecclesiastical politics and theological disputes. De La Salle was careful, before his death, to arrange for the election of a Brother to succeed him as Superior. Fundamentally obedient and intensely loyal to the Church, he yet kept an independent stance for the sake of the imperatives he saw in the gospel.

As Catholics today struggle with the problems of clericalism and sexism in the Church, the Lasallian school with its tradition of brotherhood, while not exactly anticlerical, does escape from the aura of control and privilege that so often surrounds the clerical establishment. As canonical lay persons themselves, the Brothers can understand and support movements to give lay men and lay women more leadership roles in the Church. This helps to create an atmosphere of freedom in a Lasallian institution. In an institution under direct control of church authority or a clerical institute it is not quite as easy to foster an open and critical attitude to certain aspects of church structure, policy, and observance. Brotherhood is a horizontal model that implicitly rejects the paternalism in the vertical model of fatherhood. At the same time, brotherhood implies and affirms equality in sisterhood. The Brothers today want to share with their associates in the educational mission these values implicit in their tradition of brotherhood. Nor do the Brothers consider as excluded from the brotherhood our clerical colleagues who participate in the Lasallian educational mission; as a famous Brother once put it: there isn't any reason why a priest can't be a brother.

Perhaps for that reason there is a certain lack of pretentiousness in a Lasallian institution of higher learning. There isn't so much emphasis on pomp and circumstance. The value placed on association in brotherhood tends to produce a certain atmosphere of informality and friendliness that prevails on a Lasallian campus. This aspect of the Lasallian tradition ought to be pervasive enough to transform an impersonal education institution into an authentic community where persons meet persons, where mind speaks to mind and heart speaks to heart, where the learning experience is shared with persons who can call each other friends.

A third value that emerges from the Lasallian tradition is the commitment to the service of the poor. The original vow of the Brothers was not merely one of association but association to keep gratuitous schools. Today that vow is expressed as a vow of association for the gratuitous schools. Today that vow is expressed as a vow of association for the service of the poor through education. It is understood that the educational service of the poor can be achieved either directly, by teaching those who are genuinely poor, or indirectly, by sensitizing students who are better off to the needs of the poor and to the root causes of poverty in social injustice and oppression.

For that reason, the Lasallian college or university is committed to honor the tradition of a special mission to the poor and disadvantaged. Our colleges can be legitimately proud of the large numbers of young persons from deprived backgrounds that, for almost 150 years now, have been provided at little or no cost with the advantages of a college education. As the memory of the immigrant generations and the great depression fades into history, our institutions of higher learning actively seek to recruit students from minority groups, or those whose environment has prevented them from realizing their full learning potential. The Lasallian tradition demands also that high priority be given to social justice issues across the curriculum, and in the service activities sponsored by and for the students.

A corollary of this tradition for the service of the poor is a sensitivity to the needs of a student population that may not be desperately poor but that is far from affluent and must face inevitably the prospect of a hard struggle to earn a living. For that reason, in what concerns the curriculum, a Lasallian institution of higher learning is more likely to feature a practical orientation. All the

Lasallian colleges are content to stress a quality undergraduate education, with career-oriented programs at the master's level, and let it go at that. Although three of the colleges founded by the Brothers, including this one, are legally entitled to call themselves a university, none of them, including this one, is a university in the full sense of the word, that is an institution offering a variety of doctoral programs with the emphasis on research and scholarship for its own sake. Without neglecting the liberal arts and the life of the mind, the traditional mission of the Lasallian school has been to help young people plan and prepare for a useful and humanly rewarding career.

Here at La Salle University, for example, the pursuit of learning for its own sake in the courses in the arts and physical sciences becomes practical and applied in programs in business, nursing, and teacher preparation, and in the professional offerings at the master's level. The exclusion of doctoral programs³ means that the knowledge and expertise of the faculty is at the disposal of undergraduates, that even senior faculty will teach introductory courses, that few if any teaching assistants will come between the instructor and the student.

The balance between the theoretical and the practical in the Lasallian tradition was once noted by no less a person than the great French philosopher Jacques Maritain. Speaking in 1951 at Manhattan College on the occasion of the 300th anniversary of the birth of John Baptist de La Salle, he had this to say about the Brothers and their tradition:

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 the intellect, the bringing up of a human being as human, remains the highest and indispensable aim of education. That integration . . . of the practical and 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 (the Brothers), and they work it out spontaneously, because they are neither idealists despising matter nor technocrats despising disinterested knowledge.

The remarks of Maritain lead naturally to a consideration of the fourth and final value inherent in the Lasallian tradition that I should like to stress. It is implicit in the title of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools – not the [De La Salle] Christian Brothers, mind you, but the Christian Schools. One reason De La Salle used that title was to distinguish his schools from the charity schools of the time. It was well known that the Christian Schools of De La Salle and his Brothers provided a quality education in a friendly but disciplined atmosphere, as contrasted with the deplorable state of what was available elsewhere. But the Founder also wanted his schools to have a distinctive quality derived from the Christian tradition and centered on the person and message of Jesus Christ.

For that reason, no school, not even an institution of higher learning, could claim to inherit the Lasallian tradition if it were to neglect the religious development of its maturing students. In France, even today, the word Christian means Roman Catholic. In De La Salle's day, the religious instruction in the Christian Schools was geared to inculcate in the youngsters the doctrines and the practices of the Catholic faith. But the intent was something more important,

more profound, more universal, and more enduring. De La Salle saw in the schools a chance to widen the horizons of the young lads who came to the schools, most of whom lived in an environment rife with poverty, misery, and crime. In the Christian Schools they learned that there was more to life than what they saw and experienced on the streets, that they were created by a loving God and endowed with a unique dignity and an eternal destiny, that they could find in the school community a new set of values, new role models, and a new meaning and opportunity for salvation both in this world and the next.

This broader approach enables the Lasallian university today to find creative ways to offer a religious education suitable for young adults, men and women, with varying religious and ethnic backgrounds. At La Salle University it justifies the determination to maintain a quality religion department together with the commitment of personnel and resources to the campus ministry. Although the majority of the students may come from a Roman Catholic background, some more convinced and more observant than others, Lasallian colleges now attract an increasing number of students of other faiths, or no faith at all. There is reason to hope that the tradition of the Christian Schools can still propose ultimate human, ethical, and religious values to our students of whatever religious persuasion. If John Baptist de La Salle could find creative ways to make religion attractive to the street urchins of his day, a Lasallian college ought to be able to do something similar for collegians, whose chronological age and standard of living may be different, but whose basic needs and problems are much the same.

I trust that this survey will serve to stimulate some fruitful discussion. I have attempted to explore the values in the Lasallian tradition as they might apply to an institution of higher learning such as La Salle University. That tradition is rooted in the person and the achievement of John Baptist de La Salle. It was adapted almost a century and a half ago to meet the needs of the American church in the field of higher education. It continues to thrive in a worldwide network of educational institutions characterized, as I have suggested, by good teaching, teachers associated in brotherhood and sisterhood, a direct or indirect service of the poor through education, and an education to religious maturity rooted in the ideals and values that derive from the Christian tradition. It remains for you to reflect and to determine to what extent this analysis corresponds to your experience at La Salle University as a Lasallian institution, and how you think that tradition can be maintained and enhanced.

Notes

1. Brother Luke Salm, FSC, S.T.D., (1921 - 2009) was professor emeritus of religious studies and faculty member at Manhattan College for more than a half century. A native of Albany, N.Y., he graduated from Christian Brothers Academy in that city and received his bachelor's, master's and a licentiate in theology from The Catholic University of America. Br. Luke began his teaching career at La Salle Academy in New York City in 1945. After becoming the first religious Brother and non-cleric to earn a Doctorate in Theology from the Catholic University of American in 1955, he was sent to Manhattan College to reorganize the religion department, where he injected theology into the curriculum, eventually served as chair of the theology/religious studies department (1962-1970) and as director of the graduate theology

program (1970-1978). With his esteemed status as the ranking Brother theologian, Salm was elected to represent the New York Province at the 39th General Chapter, the “renewal” chapter called for by Vatican II and held in Rome in 1966 and 1967. He was re-elected to the 1976, 1986 and 1993 chapters. He authored numerous articles on theology and religious life and 10 books, most of them dealing with the history of the De La Salle Christian Brothers, including the biography of the founder, St. John Baptist de La Salle, entitled *The Work is Yours: The Life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle*. In retirement, Salm served as the archivist for the De La Salle Christian Brothers archives of the New York District.

2. Manhattan College, La Salle University, Christian Brothers University, Lewis University, Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota, Saint Mary’s College of California, and College of Santa Fe (which closed in 2009).

3. As of 2015, five of the six Lasallian colleges and universities in the United States confer doctoral degrees.