
Brother Luke Salm: A Life, A Reminiscence, A Valediction

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Introduction

While no biography of Brother Luke Salm (1921-2009) has yet been published, the material that is presented here is an initial attempt to give some sense of the man.

The authors hope that these short pieces, each in its own way a commemoration, will help the reader to understand better the significant role that Brother Luke played as Lasallian scholar, teacher, theologian, and Brother of the Christian Schools.

Amy Surak supplies a *curriculum vitae*, a course of Brother Luke's eventful life. As she notes, during his retirement from teaching and active scholarship he continued to counsel other scholars; and Richard Tristano's reminiscence documents Brother Luke's command of Lasallian studies and how he patiently guided him as he struggled to discern a way to understand the Founder's life and charism. Finally, Brother William's eulogy, while an appreciation of Brother Luke's many accomplishments, is much more a valediction, a fond farewell to a friend and brother who served the Manhattan College community and the Lasallian Family in so many ways.

Brother Luke Salm: A Life by Amy Surak

John Francis Salm was born at Albany, New York, on April 26, 1921, the first of eight children to John and Elizabeth Salm. A bright child (he skipped the second grade!), his elementary education was at Saint Teresa's School in Albany where he was taught by the Sisters of Mercy; and his high school education was at Christian Brothers Academy (CBA). There, having been influenced by a dedicated community of Brothers and inspired teachers, John decided almost immediately that he wanted to become a De La Salle Christian Brother.

But he really had to fight for what he wanted. Admittedly, he was neither an athletic type nor one of the popular students and therefore not one of the boys the Brothers had their eye on to join. In fact, the first time the recruiter came around and asked what he wanted to be, he put down "a Brother" and he wasn't even called in. During his junior year one of the Brothers even stated to him "You won't last two weeks [in Barrytown]." Over the years Brother Luke often reminded that Brother and others of those sentiments.

After graduating from Christian Brothers Academy in 1938, John decided to enter the De La Salle Christian Brothers. However, his father postponed his entry for a few years by putting him to work to help support the growing family during the Depression and to earn the money they charged for room and board at the novitiate (\$10 a month). So after selling books door-to-door, working in a bindery sweatshop (William's Press for 27 cents an hour!) and running a newsstand

in the New York State Office building, John earned enough money to begin the novitiate at Barrytown, New York.

In September 1940, together with thirty-five classmates, John F. Salm was invested with the Brothers' habit and became Brother Celestine Luke. After spending only one year in the novitiate, albeit a rigorous and ascetical year, the whole class was then called to Washington, DC, to attend the scholasticate at The Catholic University of America (CUA). Although he expressed a desire to major in religion, Luke was persuaded to major in Latin and graduated *summa cum laude* with a BA in 1945.

His first teaching assignment out of College was at La Salle Academy, a secondary school on Second Street in New York City, where he taught Latin, geometry and moderated the band. Only three years later, thanks largely to pressure from the faculty at Manhattan College, he was summoned back to Washington to pursue a doctoral degree in theology.

While completing his graduate studies, Brother Luke served on the faculty as a teacher for the student Brothers at De La Salle College in Washington. Despite a busy schedule of graduate studies and a full teaching load of theology, Greek and Latin, Brother Luke became the first Brother and first non-cleric to receive the doctorate degree in theology (STD) from The Catholic University of America.

After receiving his doctorate in 1955, Brother Luke was sent to Manhattan College to reorganize the religion department. Teaching within the new liberal arts program, Brother Luke injected theology into the religion program and developed new courses on dogmatic theology. During this time, Luke also became an active member, and eventual leader, in the Catholic Theological Society of America. He helped form the Society of Catholic College Teachers of Religion as a forum for exchanging ideas. This helped Brother Luke introduce new and current courses to the religious studies curriculum. He eventually went on to serve as chairman of the theology/religious studies department from 1962 to 1970 and as director of the graduate theology program from 1970 to 1978. As a revered teacher, students often praised his wit and stand-up comedic style of lecturing that indeed held their interest. In addition to his teaching at the College, Luke also served as a prefect in the residence halls where he both monitored and shared the best and the worst of student life. He earned the respect of the student residents for his openness and temerity.

With his esteemed status as the ranking Brother theologian in a time of change in the Church and Institute, Brother Luke was elected to represent the New York District of the Brothers of the Christian Schools at the 39th General Chapter, the "renewal" Chapter called for by Vatican Council II and held in Rome in 1966 and 1967. With his involvement in the theological community worldwide and at the center of the Institute, it is not surprising he was re-elected again to the 1976, 1986, and 1993 General Chapters.

As a prominent lecturer on theology and religious life, Brother Luke taught at Saint Mary's College of California in 1972 and 1980 and at the Maryknoll Seminary from 1973 to 1983. When the Buttimer Institute of Lasallian Studies came into existence in 1986, Brother Luke was

asked to be the main presenter. Called onto the lecture circuit time and again, Brother Luke traveled the world.

With a remarkable gift for language and communication, Brother was also a renowned and prolific author. Brother Luke's first book was aptly named *Beginnings*, which was a collection of translations of Institute writings that focused on the formation and foundation of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. Over the years he authored several other books and countless articles in his field of theology, on the history of De La Salle and the Brothers, the Institute, theology and spirituality to name but a few topics. In addition to *Beginnings: De La Salle and His Brothers* (1980), his books include: *Encounters: De La Salle at Parmenie* (1983); *Brother Miguel Febres Cordero: Teacher, Scholar, Saint* (1984); *Brother Scubilion Rousseau: Apostle of Reconciliation* (1986); *Brother Arnold Reche: Apostolic Ascetic* (1986); *Brother Benilde Romançon: Teacher Saint* (1988); *John Baptist de La Salle: The Formative Years* (1989); *Brother Mutien Marie Wiaux: Sanctity in Simplicity* (1989); *The Work is Yours: The Life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle* (1989); *The Martyrs of Turon and Tarragona: The De La Salle Brothers in Spain 1934-1939* (1990); and *A Religious Institute in Transition: The Story of Three General Chapters* (1992).

As a result of his lecturing, these books and the numerous articles on De La Salle Christian Brothers' spirituality, the history of Manhattan College, and religious education, Brother Luke's name became recognized and celebrated all over the Institute. His research into Lasallian Studies and his writings also created the foundation for the vast Lasallian Studies Collection at Manhattan College.

In addition to becoming the first Brother to receive a doctorate in theology (STD) and serving as a delegate to the General Chapters several times over, Brother Luke received a number of honors and distinctions. These include: Phi Beta Kappa (CUA 1945); Honorary LLD (Doctor of Laws) degree from La Salle University (1977); Manhattan College Trustees Teacher-Scholar Award (1983); the National Association of Religious Brothers (NARB) "Proclaimer" Award (1986); an Honorary LHD (Doctor of Humane Letters) degree from Saint Mary's College of California (1988); and an Honorary DHum (Doctor of Humanities) degree from Lewis University (1990).

In the early 1990s, Brother Luke retired from teaching and was appointed the archivist of the De La Salle Christian Brothers Archives of the New York District. There he collected, preserved, and made available the history of the [De La Salle] Christian Brothers of the New York District. Although he occasionally spoke or wrote about the history of the Institute during this time, his own writing and lecturing mostly took back seat while he helped other scholars in their research. By the early 2000s, although he only threatened to retire as District archivist, Brother Luke did scale back the time spent in the archives. He used his energy for daily walks in Van Cortlandt Park and his passion for ships and ocean liners on relaxing sea-faring vacations with his family and friends.

When Brother Luke first learned of his pancreatic cancer five years before his death, he faced his illness with his typical frank and sensible logic. He wrote to the Brothers: "My attitude is that I have had eighty-two years of eating and drinking whatever I want with no serious illness and it is about time I paid my dues. If God wants me in God's company instead of in your company that

is God's choice. Lord, 'The work is yours.'" God chose to keep Brother Luke here for another five years. But the second time around, as the cancer returned in May of 2009 and his condition declined, God finally called Brother Luke to experience in reality and vision what he had all his life experienced in faith.

Brother Luke Salm: A Reminiscence by Richard M. Tristano

Unbeknownst to me early in 2005 Brother Robert Smith, then Vice President for Mission at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota, sent a copy of a paper I had written on the Lasallian university to Brother Luke Salm. This began four years of what amounted to an online tutorial with one of the world's greatest Lasallian experts. I saved twenty-eight of those e-mail messages. I wish that I had saved more over those years. The messages, almost always in response to something I had written, invariably began with a devastating and well-deserved critique, followed by a storehouse of advice, and concluding with an encouragement to carry on.

At some point I realized that there were an abundance of gems among those e-mails. I plucked them out and called them *A Treasury of Remarks, Comments, Statements, and Assertions Made by Luke Salm FSC and Taken from His Correspondence with Richard M. Tristano PhD*. I think he was amused, when I sent him a copy, by the pretentiousness of the title. They are arranged in no particular order and reveal the breadth, if not the depth, of Brother Luke's vast knowledge.

My last e-mail from Brother Luke was just a few weeks before his death. I had dedicated an article I published to him. He wrote back: "Thanks very much for the dedication and for all your confidence in me in the last several years. It has been a great ride." It was indeed.

A Treasury of Remarks, Comments, Statements, and Assertions

a) To my mind, the word Lasallian had no meaning apart from the person of John Baptist de La Salle.

b) Brother Michel Sauvage has made the point that De La Salle's own spirituality was eclectic – he calls it a "mystical realism."

c) But the precise genius of De La Salle was that he brought organization and structure to a practice in elementary education that was chaotic and ineffective. And he certainly stressed subject matter and curriculum. In fact, the curriculum and methods prescribed in the *Conduct of Schools* were such that a Brother could be transferred from one school to another miles away in the middle of the school year and pick up right where he had left off.

d) To De La Salle, the university system was in place, taken for granted, he himself was a product of it, but he never thought of his work in relation to the university. Once he got involved in the schools, that was another world.

e) In my view De La Salle has to be approached first of all as a man of his times with all that critical historical scholarship can tell us about those times, where he fits in and how he was influenced by them. I think on this we both agree. However, for me the question arises as to the

extent to which he was influenced by these forces but also how he resisted or transcended his historical situation.

f) Thirdly, there is no question that De La Salle was a theologian in the Tridentine tradition, and that he was formed by the Sulpicians in the French school of spirituality, but that he also was an intensely devout person, always conscious of the action of God in his life, gifted with an apostolic zeal, and ultimately what we call a saint. That is historical fact that can be verified from his writings and the impact he made on his contemporaries. It testifies to what may be called a “supernatural” dimension, but it was lived out in history and in response to his personal talents and propensities as well as his social and cultural situation and the opportunities he found in human encounters.

g) I think my De La Salle is a figure in history who, while constrained by impersonal forces and aspects of his own personality, far from being awash in them, managed to swim against the tide and create a breakthrough in the tradition-bound primary educational system that was in place apart from the university.

h) De La Salle made a difference by his insistence on teaching “by association” and his formation of a society of religious lay teachers that created a network of schools throughout France in effect created what became the French system later on. The Napoleonic system derives from De La Salle, not the other way around. The De La Salle Institute was the first to be recognized by Napoleon after the Revolution.

i) What happened in the expansion of the Lasallian enterprise and its adaptation to other cultures and other needs, including the American colleges, was that certain elements were carried over that give a distinctive character to the Lasallian institution. Among them, emphasis on quality education, good organization, the importance of teaching and teachers, a religious orientation and concern for the underprivileged. The Brothers brought to the “university,” i.e., undergraduate college, some of the best features of their experience in the grade schools and high schools, “from below” as it were rather than “from above” as from the classic ivory tower.

j) What I have in mind here is the fact that running a university has become a big business involving competition, fund raising, bureaucratic structures, depersonalization, and secularization, all at odds with what the Lasallian tradition stands for. The smaller an institution and the less its pretensions, the better chance it has to stress the Lasallian elements.

k) One more innovative feature of De La Salle and his contribution to the Catholic reform. He was not interested in catechetical instruction apart from the school. He would not allow the Brothers to teach in catechetical centers or parish Sunday schools. He always insisted that catechesis be conducted in the school situation, i.e., the life situation of the students. In other words he did not want religious instruction to be separated from life.

l) From my experience, both here and around the world, it is a lot easier to sell Lasallian, even to Catholics, than it is to sell Catholicism. If Lasallian is presented in terms of social justice, quality education, good teaching, concern for students, brotherhood rather than clericalism, moral values and religious faith broadly understood, fair-minded people will buy into it.

m) It seems to me that today we are faithful to the piece of the Lasallian tradition if we maintain that religious faith is not to be marginalized in our schools, that they are Catholic schools traditionally as well as Lasallian, that we recognize that the Spirit operates in every religious tradition (Vatican Council II), that we respect religious values, however understood, and reject the notion that the classroom can be a pulpit for proselytizing either for or against religion, that religious values and the good example that comes from a religious commitment, have an appropriate place in every aspect of the institution.

n) I agree that a person cannot be Lasallian without religious faith but such a person can buy into all the aspects of the Lasallian tradition in an institution, including its concern for religion. The institution can be Lasallian without every person in the institution being a person of faith.

o) I think that is what we are trying to do in preserving the Lasallian charism in institutions of higher learning in a society that is secular, religiously pluralistic, and one that values personal conscience, religious and academic freedom, all of which elements were missing in the experience of De La Salle in seventeenth-century France. Whether we are succeeding or can succeed in what may be an impossible task is the question that you and I have raised in our respective presentations.

Brother Luke Salm: A Valediction by William Mann, FSC

In my last conversation with Brother Luke in June ... as we said goodbye ... with a twinkle in his eye ... he recalled our teary farewell of a few years ago when, while serving as Vicar General in Rome, I had flown to New York prior to the surgery from which Brother Luke didn't think he'd survive ... arriving at his hospital bed on the evening before the operation ... to say not so much farewell ... but thank you ... thanks to a friend and brother ... an inspiration and icon ... for all he had been to me personally ... but thanks, also, as Vicar General, in the name of the whole Institute ... for the enormous contribution he had made ... for the remarkable gifts he had shared ... for the countless lives he had touched ... not only here in the portion of God's kingdom known as Manhattan College, but in the Institute and Lasallian Family in North America and all around the world.

For me, a heart-breaking but grace-filled hospital visit ... where I had the privilege in the name of all Lasallians to thank in a personal way one of the Lasallian giants of the second half of the twentieth-century. This delightfully human, dynamic life-force and vital protagonist in the awesome theological and catechetical renewal of the 1960s and in most, if not all, of the principal Lasallian events and issues of our day.

Not only for his participation in four General Chapters ... a most uncommon occurrence ... sent as a gifted representative of the New York District ... but to have actually been ... at the General Chapter of 1966-1967... a key and significant player in crafting the *Declaration* of the Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today ... often joking in later years that his most significant contribution was in getting the late great Brother Michel Sauvage of France to draft a document that was shorter by hundreds of pages than anything else that Brother Michel had ever written.

Not only as someone who, after the General Chapter of 1986, shared with so many of us insights into our new *Rule* ... but also as one who had served on the Commission that actually wrote it ... contributing theological expertise and Lasallian insight to its sometimes lyrical final version ...

A man for the ages ... who attempted to help the Brothers around the world to re-vision and re-capture ... the passion of the Lasallian origins ... so that “our world so secular and broken” might glimpse Christ alive in us⁴ and, hopefully, “fall in love with God again.”⁵

It is my honor and privilege to give voice today to the gratitude of many ... for this man who now “shines like the stars” ... shines both in the eternal presence of God and in the hearts of those “who will eternally bear witness to the great gratitude we have” for having been blessed and privileged to bask in his delightful presence.⁶

How fitting it is that the Gospel of the Good Shepherd⁷ was chosen for our liturgy today ... in remembrance of the life of a man ... who across continents and cultures and generations ... by word and deed ... in faith and zeal ... strove to reach out and draw together ... to welcome and include ... such disparate and varied elements in our Church and our Lasallian world.

However, I’d like to propose an additional or alternative ... less pastoral ... more contemporary ... image to capture the spirit of Brother Luke ... one borrowed from theologian Michael Himes ... who recently proposed to a group of university professors “an image of the intellectual tradition of humanity [at our colleges and universities] as a cocktail party where every teacher works as a host, inviting new and perhaps uncomfortable guests to come and mingle with history’s greatest minds and most generous souls. ‘We have the privilege,’ he reminded the participants, ‘of helping others to love what we fell in love with ourselves.’”⁸

Imagining Brother Luke ... disciple and follower of the Good Shepherd, who sought out and welcomed in ... by working the crowd as teacher or as host at a cocktail party resonates with me. Brother Luke as brother ... theologian ... professor ... friend ... residence hall prefect ... inviting and entertaining ... engaging and drawing out ... introducing others ... helping us love ... what he fell in love with himself ... being fully and joyfully alive ... sharing his passion for teaching and scholarship ... for theology and brotherhood ... for words and for the Word ... for our Founder, the *Declaration*, the *Rule* ... for being a Lasallian ... and a Brother ... “some for now and some forever.”⁹

I used to think Brother Luke did what he did in addition to his work as College teacher and professor of theology ... but I came later to realize that it was precisely from within his core as College teacher and theologian ... that his giftedness emerged. It was not lost on him that, like John Baptist de La Salle, he was both theologian and gifted writer and that they shared the gifts of keen intellect, resolute tenacity, and the ability to inspire and motivate others. It was not lost on me that his theological doctoral studies and collegial experience in higher education at his beloved Manhattan College ... prepared and fashioned him for the role he was called to play on the international stage.

And so today, we pause to thank his family and the Manhattan College Community for sharing their brother with the world ... We thank God for the gift of this giant we now mourn ... who

contributed so powerfully “to the general good of the Church”¹⁰ ... to the education of so many religious and clerics ... and to the formation, dignity, and empowerment of the Christian laity on college campuses and, for so many years, at the Buttimer Institute of Lasallian Studies.

And we say our final thank you to Brother Luke himself ... whose very “presence brightened everything”¹¹ and whose devotion as brother, teacher, and friend inspired and taught many, not only “the road to heaven,”¹² but the pathway toward a more full and glorious life¹³ ... beginning right here in this world and continuing with God for all eternity ... Safe voyage home, Brother Luke; and God speed on the journey.

Endnotes

1. Amy Surak is the archivist of Manhattan College (since 2002) and the archivist of the Lasallian Research Collection of the Brothers of the Christian Schools at Manhattan College. She received her Master of Arts degree in history and museum studies and her certificate in archival management from New York University in 1999.

2. Richard M. Tristano is professor of history at Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota (since 1991). He is an alumnus of Manhattan College and received a Doctor of Philosophy degree in history from New York University in 1983.

3. Brother William Mann is the president of Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota (since 2008). He received a Doctor of Ministry degree from Colgate Rochester Divinity School in 1990.

4. Galatians 2:20

5. Father Raniero Cantalamessa, preacher to the papal household.

6. John Baptist de La Salle, *Meditation* #208.2.

7. *John* 10:11-18.

8. *America*, 6-13 July 2009.

9. Brother Charles Kitson FSC (1949-2016).

10. John Baptist de La Salle, *Meditation* #208.3.

11. John O’Donohue, “To Bless the Space between Us.”

12. John Baptist de La Salle, *Meditation* #208.3.

13. *John* 10:10.