

An Honor Student Who Made Good

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It is indeed an honor and a pleasure to be here once again on the campus of Lewis University, hallowed now by the memory of my good friend and onetime colleague, Brother David Delahanty.³ I note with satisfaction that you now have an award in his name for student athletes. That would have pleased David. He wasn't much of an athlete himself; but at Manhattan College, as Dean of the Students of Teacher preparation, where most of the athletes were enrolled, he held them to the highest academic standards. During a period when Manhattan College's athletic teams were disappearing from the lists of the top ten or the top twenty-five, maybe even the top anything, Brother David was more concerned that our athletes graduated with a college degree, and that they knew enough and had integrity enough to enjoy fruitful careers as teachers and coaches. Most of them have since become a major influence for good on young people in the New York metropolitan area and beyond.

It is also a genuine delight for me to congratulate those of you who are my fellow honorees, students who have given proof that you take seriously the opportunities for intellectual growth that this Lasallian institution of higher learning affords. You deserve the honors you received tonight. You had to work hard to get them. All I had to do to get mine was to prepare this little speech.

In a special way, I do want to thank Brother James, your President, and the Board of Trustees for giving me the third degree treatment. I thank also the author of that citation. Back home at Manhattan College I am often called upon to write citations for recipients of honorary degrees. I know from experience that such prose belongs to the literary genre known as historical fiction.

I would like to say a few words to you this evening about an honor student of long ago, an honor student who made good and did great things with the talent God had given him. That honor student's name was John Baptist de La Salle. The oldest son of a well-to-do family, he graduated *summa cum laude* from the University College in Rheims, France, in 1669. 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.

So here was this brilliant thirty-year-old priest, recently ordained, with first class academic credentials. He had plenty of money at his disposal and an influential network of family and friends. They were more than 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. In today's language, he had it made.

But a funny thing happened on the way to becoming a clerical bigwig. Father De La Salle got involved gradually with a motley crew of barely literate young men who wanted to teach poor boys in the rundown Charity Schools of that day, 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 that, almost by accident, the young Father De La Salle gradually assumed the leadership of that little group 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 rough and uneducated they were, he invited them to come for meals to see if he could 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 own home to live. Finally, in 1682, he moved with them to a house in a poor neighborhood. From that center, this first community of [De La Salle] Christian Brothers 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.⁴

To appreciate the significance of what this one-time *summa cum laude* honor student was able eventually to achieve, you have to understand something 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 only to those who were socially and financially in a position to afford it, as was De La Salle himself. Apart from the university schools, the only elementary education available, and that also at a price, was from tutors who made a living running one-man schools in their own homes.

If you were poor, forget it. Although most parishes tried to provide Charity Schools, they 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.⁵

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 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. Who ever heard of giving rich and poor the same education in the same classroom, and for free? That was against the law.

Then there were the Church authorities. Pastors, bishops, and even the Cardinal Archbishop of Paris, persecuted Father 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 of salvation 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 no provision at the 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 and 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.

The creative vision of this honors student from 1669 to 1680 has survived for more than three hundred years and is alive and well among the Brothers and their lay and clerical colleagues in more than eighty 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.

It was not clear at first that this was something that the Brothers could or ought to do. For one thing, the Jesuits were already conducting colleges in several American cities, a work that seemed better suited to their special ministry to train and educate the 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 monopoly, realizing that no single type of college could satisfy all the needs of an American Church coming of age.

However that may be, the Brothers responded wholeheartedly by opening their first colleges ever. Within twenty years of their arrival from France in 1848,⁶ the Brothers had colleges operating in New York, Philadelphia, Saint Louis, and San Francisco, literally from coast to coast. It took a bit longer for us to find Romeoville. At present, in the United States there are seven⁷ institutions of higher learning operating under the sponsorship of the [De La Salle] Christian Brothers.

The extension of the Lasallian vision into the field of higher education is perhaps the most distinctive and most radical characteristic of the American Brothers. The amazing thing is that in making this adaptation to a particular need, the Brothers were able 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 new to the field of higher education in this country.

For that reason, even in their colleges, the Brothers continue to honor their special mission to the poor and underprivileged. The Brothers have always prided themselves on the large numbers of young persons from deprived backgrounds that they were able to get through college. As the memory of the immigrant generations and the great depression fades into history, the Brothers now actively seek to recruit college students from minority groups, or those whose environment has prevented them from realizing their full learning potential. Our tradition demands that we put a high priority on education to social justice across the curriculum and in the service activities sponsored by and for the students of our colleges. Modest tuition rates and extensive scholarship aid continue in a modern context the tradition of gratuity inherited from De La Salle.

Another feature of the Brothers' colleges is a certain lack of pretentiousness about them. All of our colleges are content to stress a quality undergraduate education, with occasional programs at the master's level, and leave it at that. Although three of our colleges, 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. The Brothers, along with our lay and clerical faculty colleagues, do indeed have impressive academic credentials; and they continue to keep abreast of their fields. But the exclusion of doctoral programs⁸ from the college means that the knowledge and expertise of the faculty is totally at the disposal of the undergraduates, that even senior faculty will teach introductory courses, that few if any teaching assistants will come between the instructor and the student.

The result is a certain atmosphere of friendliness and informality on our campuses. That derives from a three hundred year old tradition 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. Today we consciously extend our sense of brotherhood to our lay and clerical brothers and sisters who share our educational mission. This aspect of the Lasallian tradition is usually pervasive enough to transform the impersonal institution into an authentic community where the learning experience is shared with persons we can call our friends.

In what concerns the curriculum, a Brothers' college is more likely to have a practical orientation. Without neglecting the liberal arts and the life of the mind, the Brothers' traditional mission has been to help young people plan and prepare for a useful and humanly rewarding

career. The programs here at Lewis University in aviation, communications, criminal and social justice, the arts, business, and nursing are notable and typical examples.

No school, much less an institution of higher learning, could claim to inherit the Lasallian tradition if it were to neglect the religious development of its maturing students. John Baptist de La Salle called the young Society he created the Brothers of the Christian Schools; not the Christian Brothers, mind you, but the Christian Schools. In the France of his day, Christian meant Roman Catholic; and the religious instruction in the schools was geared to inculcate in the youngsters the doctrine 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 Brothers and their colleges today to find creative ways to offer a religious education suitable for young adults, men and women, with varying religious and ethnic backgrounds. Although the majority of our students tend to be Roman Catholics, some more convinced and more observant than others, we now attract an increasing number of students of other faiths, or no faith at all. The Brothers are convinced that the tradition of the Christian Schools can still propose ultimate human and religious values to college students of whatever religious persuasion. If De La Salle could find creative ways to make religion attractive to the street urchins of his day, we ought to be able to do something similar for our collegians, whose chronological age and standard of living may be different, but whose basic needs and problems are much the same.

I began this presentation by introducing you to an honors student of long ago. Like you, he had no clear idea as he collected his academic honors what life had in store for him. His creative intelligence, coupled with a willingness to sacrifice himself to meet the needs of others, led to significant changes in the social structure, religious life, and the educational system of his day. The momentum of that creative achievement continues today in places like Lewis University, where the Brothers and their colleagues provide a socially responsible, practical, and religiously oriented education at the college level. You have been the beneficiaries of that long tradition. You, like John Baptist de La Salle, have talent and creativity, as your honors attest. There is a whole world of opportunities and needs out there waiting for you. The only question is what will you do about it.

Endnotes

1. This talk was delivered, when Brother Luke was awarded an honorary doctorate, at an Honors Convocation at Lewis University on 17 April 1990.

2. Brother Luke Salm (1921-2009) was a professor of religious studies at Manhattan College for more than half a century. He was the first religious Brother and non-cleric to earn a doctorate in theology (STD) at The Catholic University of America (1955). He was an elected delegate of the District of New York to the 39th, 40th, 41st, and 42nd General Chapters of the Brothers of the Christian Schools; and he was a noted historian of the life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle.

3. Brother David Delahanty was president of Lewis University from 1982 until his untimely death in 1987 from cancer.

4. *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle* (Book One) by Jean-Baptiste Blain, edited by Luke Salm, and translated by Richard Arandez (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 2000), page 80.

5. *Rule of 1718* in *Rule and Foundational Documents* by John Baptist de La Salle and translated and edited by Augustine Loes and Ronald Isetti (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 2002), page 14 (#1.4 and #1.5).

6. It was in 1848 that the De La Salle Christian Brothers opened a school in New York City; La Salle Academy in Manhattan is considered its successor school. The school in Baltimore that opened in 1845 is considered the first permanent foundation in the United States; Calvert Hall College High School is considered its successor school. Schools that were conducted in the first half of the nineteenth century in the lower Midwest (for example, in Saint Genevieve, MO) died off pretty quickly.

7. The seven referenced here as being operating in 1990 under the sponsorship of the De La Salle Christian Brothers were: Manhattan College, La Salle University, Saint Mary's College of California, Saint Mary's College of Winona (now Saint Mary's University of Minnesota), Christian Brothers University, Lewis University, and the College of Santa Fe (which closed in 2009).

8. While this was true in 1990 when this talk was being delivered, it is not the case in 2016 since four of the Lasallian colleges and universities in the USA now award what are called professional doctorates (as opposed to what are traditionally referred to as research doctorates). Saint Mary's University of Minnesota awards three doctorates: Doctor of Education, Doctor of Psychology, and Doctor of Business Administration. La Salle University awards three doctorates: Doctor of Nursing Practice, Doctor of Psychology, and Doctor of Theology. Lewis University awards two doctorates: Doctor of Education and Doctor of Nursing Practice. Saint Mary's College of California awards one doctorate: Doctor of Education.