

Characteristics of Lasallian Schools

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The year 1980 marked the 300th anniversary of the 1680 founding of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools by John Baptist de La Salle. As part of one program organized at Manhattan College in New York City to celebrate that event, this author addressed the topic of the characteristics of the Brothers' school in a lecture entitled "De La Salle and His Brothers: An Adventure in Education." Since then others have had occasion to address this topic. In 1986, the USA Regional Education Committee published the results of discussions by Brothers and lay colleagues at the Huether Workshop in a booklet entitled *Characteristics of Lasallian Schools*. In the following year, the International Education Committee in Rome published the results of a symposium on the topic entitled *Characteristics of a Lasallian School Today*. In one way or another, this topic has also been addressed in the doctoral dissertations of Brothers Dominic Everett,³ William Mann,⁴ Frederick Mueller,⁵ and George Van Grieken,⁶ as noted in the introduction by Brother Dominic Everett to the recently published translation of De La Salle's *Conduct of Schools*, edited by Brother William Mann.⁷

Other factors have kept this topic to the forefront. On the one hand, there are those who argue that Catholic schools in this country all have pretty much the same characteristics and that it is futile to try to distinguish one group from another. On the other hand, there are those who are convinced that indeed there is something special about the schools conducted or originally founded by the De La Salle Brothers, difficult to define perhaps, but distinctive nonetheless. Whatever has been distinctive about these schools seems threatened in the present situation where the number and influence of the Brothers in the schools is declining. As a counterbalance, the affirmation by the 42nd General Chapter of 1993 of a Lasallian mission shared between Brothers and lay partners has provoked new interest in the educational achievement and vision of John Baptist de La Salle and the impact of that tradition on the schools. In many situations, that tradition will be increasingly in the hands of lay partners, with or without the presence of some Brothers. Now that institutions once identified as Brothers' schools have become more appropriately recognized as Lasallian schools, it seems more urgent than ever to articulate what it is that gives those schools their distinctive character.

In the conviction that the six characteristics proposed in 1980 have yet something to contribute to the ongoing discussion, this present essay will review and to some extent update the reflections that were made at that time. The suggestion remains that there are six elements which, taken together, constitute the concrete and distinctive reality of the Lasallian school.

The first such characteristic is a sensitivity to social needs. This is what started the Lasallian adventure in the first place. In the seventeenth century, John Baptist de La Salle became increasingly aware that the Christian schools were one solution to the urgent needs of the artisans and the poor. The expressions in the *Rule* of the Brothers can be paraphrased to apply to anyone teaching in a Lasallian school:

In their educational activity the teachers show a social concern for those who lack material goods, personal talent, or human affection; this is an essential part of their mission.⁸

Even when teaching the well-to-do, there is the obligation to teach all the students that they have a responsibility to bring the reign of justice and charity to all the world.⁹

The social problems of today's world are not less acute but much more complex than they were in the Founder's time. They are much less susceptible to direct and easy solution. In a secularized society, a religiously motivated or sponsored approach to social problems is not always welcome or even possible. Many situations of social injustice cry out for radical solutions that demand resources religious schools simply do not have. For these and other reasons, the Lasallian mission in many parts of the world has been extended to secondary schools and colleges, to the suburban apostolate as it might be called.

The development of such a mission is perhaps providential. For De La Salle, it was not only the poverty of young people that was the problem, but the fact that they were "left to themselves and badly brought up" by parents who had to work to make ends meet. Today in the suburban schools we see many examples of a similar social situation. There are everywhere in relatively affluent suburbs, more and more students from broken homes and single parent families who desperately need the attention, affection, and inspiration that they can find in their Lasallian teachers as role models.

Yet, despite all the complexities and rationalizations, the Lasallian enterprise could not lose its traditional sensitivity to the needs of the poor without losing its identity. That is why the tuition in the Lasallian schools is kept relatively low. The schools try to extend scholarship programs, to make exceptional arrangements for the less gifted students and to treat them with special concern. In the United States there is a national Lasallian educational committee that serves as a stimulus and resource for our schools to introduce and to improve courses in social justice. These courses are designed to provide not only instruction in abstract principles but also to sensitize students to global social needs and, where possible, to provide some direct field experience in social action. Many of the teachers are personally involved in movements to alleviate world hunger, cut consumerism, and change the social structures that perpetuate oppression and injustice.

The second but not secondary characteristic of the Lasallian school is the importance given to religious education. This, too, means something different than it did in the Founder's day. Society today is no longer religiously homogeneous; it is not exclusively or dominantly Christian, much less Roman Catholic. The *Declaration [of The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today]* from the 39th General Chapter of 1967 recognizes this when it says:

Not all of those who come to a Christian School are necessarily looking for an education that is explicitly Christian. A keen sensitivity to the requirements of religious freedom obliges us not to impose indiscriminately the same catechesis on all our students, especially when they are more mature.¹⁰

For this reason, the Lasallian school recognizes that religious education today can mean many things. It can help the student understand his [her] religious experience and commitment at the deepest level of maturity and freedom. Religious education reveals the element of mystery in human existence, the possibilities that transcend the empirical order, and the horizons that expand the meaning of what it is to live and to die. Religious education is value-centered education and so concerned with all that relates to life, love, trust, fidelity, freedom, justice, brotherhood and sisterhood in community. Religious education raises doubts about limited perspectives and unexamined presuppositions; it raises questions that can lead from agnosticism to faith. A religious educator knows how to lead students who no longer respond to traditional doctrine and creeds, legal codes or sacramental cult, to seek new words to express what they doubt and what they believe, to externalize their awe at a transcendent mystery in sign and ritual that they can relate to, to identify their failure and to repent of sin, to live out their commitment in justice and love. This in no way excludes the opportunity that the Lasallian school has to challenge students, when it is appropriate, with the demands of their membership in the Catholic Church along with formal instruction in the Christian faith and, even better, an introduction to the more profound implications of the religious truth they already know and accept.

A third characteristic of the Brothers' school is commitment, in association, to teaching as a vocation. It was at once the most difficult task and at the same time the most noble achievement of John Baptist de La Salle to bring his followers to see that a teacher does not merely work at a job; teaching involves a vocation and a mission; the work that one does in the classroom has a significance that is worthy of the commitment and dedication of a lifetime. To speak of teaching as a vocation implies that there is a divine involvement in a personal choice. To enter upon a teaching career in a Lasallian context is viewed as a response to a call from God as much as a response to an advertised vacancy. In excluding the option for the priesthood from the Brothers,¹¹ De La Salle was in fact inviting them to see teaching as a genuine vocation in itself and not attached to some other form of ministry, much less as a steppingstone to a more exalted ecclesiastical function.

In today's world there is need to reaffirm the vocation of the teacher. Teaching is seen today less as a vocation than as a profession, with professional standards to be met on the one hand and professional privileges to be jealously guarded on the other hand. And teaching is not generally regarded as one of the more lucrative professions. As the administrative structure of the schools becomes more complex, it is distressing to observe that more and more teachers seem ready to abandon classroom teaching for careers as administrators and guidance counselors and in auxiliary services. Indispensable as these functions may be, the Lasallian school will lose an important part of its identity if the teaching staff does not appreciate the unique effectiveness of what happens between a competent committed teacher interacting with the students in the classroom.

This commitment takes place in an educational community where teachers are associated together to live out their vocation to teach. Association in the educational enterprise was such an important element for John Baptist de La Salle that he made it a religious vow. To this day, the vow of association for the service of the poor through education is one of the vows the Brothers take. In Lasallian schools today participation by association for an

educational enterprise has to be, and indeed has been, expanded to include the lay and clerical colleagues of the Brothers. The traditional sense of association becomes concretized in a genuine educational community where, in the pursuit of knowledge, persons meet persons, mind speaks to mind, and heart to heart. Despite differences in states of life and lifestyle, Brothers and lay colleagues are called upon to live out this association for a shared educational mission in a common vocation to teach.

The fourth characteristic of the Lasallian school is the quality of the education that takes place there. That is what the word “Christian” in the designation of the schools originally stood for. The Founder favored the term Christian Schools to distinguish the Brothers’ schools from the other Charity schools of the day where chaos rather than quality prevailed. In contrast to noisy and filthy ruffians in the Charity schools presided over by underpaid and undertrained masters, De La Salle insisted on cleanliness, politeness, discipline and – what was most unusual for the time – regular attendance. His teachers were dedicated and trained. This made scholastic progress possible. In a short time, the bourgeoisie, who would never allow their sons to mingle with the smelly roughnecks in the Charity schools, began to seek admission to the schools of De La Salle happy now to have them receive their education side by side with the poor. The Christian school got to be known as the best school in town.

That image is not as easy to maintain in today’s world where educational standards have been standardized and every school worthy of the name aims to provide a quality education. Nevertheless, the Institute of the Brothers still enjoys a reputation for running good schools, possibly because that remains at the heart of the mission of the Institute. This motivates the administrators in a Lasallian school to keep the standards of scholarship high and to provide the best possible opportunities for the teachers to grow professionally. The Lasallian school today inherits a tradition for maintaining good discipline, tempered by a spirit of friendliness that the Brothers and their colleagues aim to have prevail in their schools. This two-fold spirit of discipline and friendship creates a climate that supports and enhances the quality of the education that takes place in the classroom.

The loyalty of the Lasallian alumni associations provides evidence for this. In today’s world, where quality education is more generally available than it was in the Founder’s time, it might be presumptuous to claim that the Lasallian school is always the best in town. But there is a powerful reason for Lasallian educators to want to maintain the advantage that comes from three hundred years of being number one.

The fifth characteristic of the Lasallian school is its emphasis on the practical. In the seventeenth century, De La Salle had a clear sense of what was needed to advance the social situation of the children of the poor. If not the very first to offer instruction in French instead of Latin, he argued for its practicality against the educational establishment of the time and demonstrated that it could work. He wrote a manual for the schools that put the emphasis on the basics of reading, writing, and religious instruction with precise methodologies to produce effective results. The importance he gave to cleanliness and the rules of politeness made it possible for the children of the poor to move about more easily in the stratified society of the France of Louis XIV. The students left the Christian schools well

trained in how to write business letters, contracts, bills of sale, and other useful skills that would ensure a decent livelihood.

To this day, Lasallian schools intended for the poor and disadvantaged still focus on training in skills and trades that will make the students useful to themselves and society. The extension of the Lasallian mission in this country to include secondary schools and colleges was motivated by the practical needs of the immigrant generations, enabling them to qualify for careers in politics and the professions. More than most similar institutions, the Lasallian colleges, for example, tend to parallel instruction in the liberal arts with pre-professional training in specialized fields, especially business and engineering. The professional development of the teachers themselves has tended to have a practical aim, more often than not determined by the credentials needed to secure accreditation of the institution in which they serve.

This practical sense is so deeply rooted in the Lasallian tradition that compared to the Jesuit tradition, for example, it sometimes seems to verge on the anti-intellectual. That is not necessarily bad insofar as it keeps the attention centered on the needs of the students. However, there have always been some Lasallian teachers who develop into creative and productive scholars in their respective fields. In our colleges, particularly, and in some secondary schools as well, there are teachers who argue that the most practical education is a sound theoretical one. In an age of technical know-how and explosive discoveries in empirical science, society needs theoreticians to think creatively and critically about what is going on in the world. It would not be a betrayal of the Lasallian sense of the practical if the schools were also to contribute a fair share of the future leaders in the humanities and the arts.

The sixth and final element that distinguishes the Lasallian school is rooted in the fact that, although the Lasallian Institute fulfills its mission with the blessing and within the broader mission of the Roman Church, it has managed at the same time to keep a certain distance from Church concerns. The Founder did not want his Institute to become dependent on any particular bishop or local Church authority. When threatened in one diocese he would move to another. Since he did not want to model his Society too closely on any other religious congregation, he adopted a rather bizarre religious habit and moved cautiously and creatively in the matter of religious vows. Much has been made of the fact that he sent a Brother to Rome, but this was less a gesture of subservience than an attempt to secure papal approval that would authenticate and protect the distinctively lay character of his Institute. The total exclusion of the priesthood kept the Brothers 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.

With some notable exceptions, this attitude has prevailed in the history of the Institute and in the Lasallian schools. The Lasallian tradition is inclined to emphasize the simplicity of the lifestyle of lay Christians and to minimize manifestations of ecclesiastical pomp. Although Lasallian teachers and Brothers in particular usually respect and admire priests and the

priesthood, sometimes almost excessively, they manage by and large to dispense with the external deference due to clerical privilege and rank. Being laymen themselves, the Brothers understand and are in a position to support movements to give laymen and lay women more leadership roles in the Church. Likewise in a Lasallian school, in contrast with what might be expected in schools conducted by the clergy, there is likely to be a more open and critical attitude to some aspects of Catholic tradition, piety, and observance.

More than anything else, the Lasallian tradition has kept alive in the Church the spirit and reality of brotherhood. The Institute to which the Lasallian mission has been entrusted is composed of Brothers who are not fathers in any sense of the word. In contemporary language and life the horizontal model of brotherhood is more appealing than the paternalism implicit in the vertical model of fatherhood. At the same time, there is a growing realization that brotherhood implies sisterhood, that the brotherhood in the Lasallian educational community includes a sisterhood, establishing an equal and equitable relationship between teachers who can call one another brothers and sisters.

Those, then, are six distinctive features of the Lasallian school. To recap them briefly, they are: sensitivity to social needs, religious education, association in teaching as a vocation, practical instruction, quality education, and a unique role in the Catholic Church. Other schools, no doubt, manifest many of these same qualities. But taken together they seem to describe that elusive something that we call a Lasallian school. It is the privileged instrument for the accomplishment of the shared Lasallian mission which is “to provide a human and Christian education for the young, especially the poor.”¹²

Endnotes

1. Brother Luke Salm finalized writing this essay on January 26, 1997.
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 Dominic Everett, “John Baptist de La Salle’s ‘The Conduct of Schools’: A Guide to Teacher Education” [PhD dissertation, Loyola University of Chicago (1984)].
4. Brother William Mann, “The Lasallian School: Where Teachers Assist Parents in the Education and Formation of Children” [DMin dissertation, Colgate Rochester Divinity School (1990)].

5. Brother Frederick Mueller, “The Perceived and Preferred Goals of Principals, De La Salle Christian Brother Teachers, and Lay Teachers in Lasallian Secondary Schools” [EdD dissertation, Boston College (1994)].
6. Brother George Van Grieken, “‘To Touch Hearts’: The Pedagogical Spirituality of John Baptist de La Salle” [PhD dissertation, Boston College (1995)].
7. “Introduction” by Brother Edward (aka Dominic) Everett in *The Conduct of the Christian Schools* by John Baptist de La Salle (Lasallian Publications, 1996), page 32.
8. Cf. *The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (Rome, 1987), #40.
9. Cf. *The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (Rome, 1987), #40.
10. *The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today: A Declaration* (Rome, 1967), #39.2.
11. Cf. *The Work Is Yours: The Life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle* by Luke Salm (Christian Brothers Publications, 1989), pages 71-72 and 80-84; and also *Circular 386: The Lay Character of the Institute* by Brothers of the Christian Schools (Rome, 1966).
12. *The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (Rome, 1987), #3.