

Religion at Manhattan College and the Lasallian Vision

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To begin with, we had better be clear about the meaning of that elusive word Lasallian. Sometimes it is stretched to mean almost anything, which is another way of saying it means nothing. That term makes sense only if it derives from and refers to the seventeenth century French priest whose name is John Baptist de La Salle, Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

De La Salle was a man of vision, not that he had visions, but that he could see. And he not only saw things with his own two eyes, but increasingly throughout his difficult and turbulent life he saw things with the eyes of God, a faith vision. He lived constantly in the presence of God and trusted implicitly in the providence of God. He encouraged the early Brothers to cultivate this faith vision, the spirit of faith as he called it, by frequently recalling the presence of God as we still do today. In his *Rule* he tells the Brothers that the spirit of faith leads them not to look on anything except with the eyes of God and not to do anything except with God in view.

For De La Salle this faith vision was no airy abstraction, but worked itself out in the concrete events of his own life and that of the first Brothers. It was this view that led him to abandon his comfortable lifestyle in an affluent bourgeois family to cast his lot with the undisciplined, unkempt, and untrained teachers that gathered around him. His view of what God was asking of him led him to renounce his lucrative position as a priest and Canon of the Cathedral, as well as his personal wealth, and to give the proceeds to the starving poor in time of famine. He saw the poor children that came to the schools as God sees them, as children of God. He saw schooling as a way to rescue them from their poverty in this world and to bring them to their eternal destiny with God in the next world. His unique view of what the Christian and gratuitous schools for the poor ought to be and how they should be run met with relentless opposition from the educational and ecclesiastical establishment of the time. In the face of the powerful forces against him, he knew that the schools would survive only if God wanted them. He trusted God, quoting the prophet Habakuk "Lord, the work is yours."

De La Salle's vision has survived for over 300 years and has spread to more than eighty countries. The United States is one of those countries and Manhattan College is one of the many Lasallian institutions claiming to live in the twenty-first century by the vision of De La Salle. We are accustomed to cite at least four elements in that vision that are still relevant today: 1) a quality education through excellence in teaching; 2) concern for the individual student in an atmosphere of association and non-clerical brotherhood; 3) service of the poor either directly or indirectly by sensitivity to social issues; 4) providing for the religious development of the students through an integration of religion with secular education.

As we reflect on how these four elements have functioned at Manhattan College, we can discern a certain continuity and viability in the first three: quality teaching, concern for the

individual student, and sensitivity to social issues. But it seems to me that religion is the area where the continuity with the Lasallian vision is less apparent and where the change has been most startling. I have listed religion as the fourth Lasallian element, although De La Salle would probably have put it first.

If we look at the history of Manhattan College for the first hundred years of its chartered history, that is, from 1863 to 1963, I think we can say that religion, and specifically the Roman Catholic religion, was pretty much the same privileged and pervasive force that it was in the schools of De La Salle's day. At Manhattan, the vast majority of the students were Catholics. Courses on the teachings of the Catholic Church were required of all students in all academic programs in all four years. Classroom prayer, as well as attendance at Catholic religious activities and devotional practices, what we now call campus ministry, was for the most part obligatory. Students were encouraged to lead lives in conformity with the ideals of the gospel. The dominance in administrative positions and in the faculty of vowed religious Brothers, with most of the lay faculty and staff staunchly Catholic, assured that religion would be provided for and integrated with the quality education that the College has always offered.

As we all know, in the present situation all that has changed, and changed radically. The aftermath of World War II, the dawn of the atomic and technological age, secularism, professionalism, together with the events of the Second Vatican Council followed by changes in the Church and developments in inter-religious cooperation, all have served to unsettle what was once a cohesive and rather isolated Catholic subculture. The result is an entirely new context for religion to survive and function, especially in higher education.

In the face of such a challenge, Manhattan so far has been able to affirm its Catholic Lasallian identity and to keep religion from being totally marginalized. Formal classroom instruction in religion has been transformed from its catechetical roots to theology and religious studies, more appropriate in a university setting. Nine credits in this field are still required of all students in all five schools. The religious studies faculty is professionally qualified and all tenured professors have doctoral degrees. There is no full-time [De La Salle] Christian Brother among them but courses in Catholic theology continue to be offered.

To accommodate the increasing number of students and faculty of other faiths, the department offers, in addition to Catholic theology, courses in other religious traditions and courses that relate religion to human experience. Religious questions are also addressed as appropriate in other courses in the academic curriculum, especially in areas such as philosophy, education, literature, some of the sciences and pre-professional programs.

The liturgical and devotional life of the campus is the responsibility of a well-staffed campus ministry team that sponsors a variety of social action programs and also provides spiritual counseling for students who seek it. Sunday Eucharist for residents is well attended and active participation is fairly good. Daily Eucharist and structured prayer services attract a small group of faculty and staff. Recently, sessions in techniques for meditation have been introduced and a significant number of students have shown interest.

One of the most creative aspects at present of the religious life of the College has been the development of Lasallian awareness and Lasallian-centered activities. The orientation program

for new faculty and staff includes a presentation by the president on the Lasallian tradition and all are given a copy of the life of John Baptist de La Salle. The energetic Lasallian Education Committee, composed of Brothers and dedicated lay associates, sponsors activities such as the annual Lasallian Educator awards and the Lasallian Convocation. An impressive number of faculty and staff, not all of them Catholics, have participated in national and even international Lasallian programs to study in depth the vision of De La Salle and its relevance to education today. The result is a renewed consciousness in the College of various aspects of the Lasallian tradition.

Finally, the [De La Salle] Christian Brothers continue to be an important sign of the commitment of the College to religious values. The president and the vice president for student life are Brothers. While there are no longer many Brothers among the teaching faculty, recent years have seen the addition of Brothers assigned to staff positions in admissions, residence life, and student-centered activities. Members of the Brothers' community, including the retired Brothers, participate in College events, and often host student and faculty groups for meetings, prayer, and meals in the Brothers' residence. The Brothers' community annually makes substantial contributions to scholarships for needy students and to support the activities of the Lasallian Education Committee.

In addition, it can be reported that at a recent all-day retreat meeting of the Trustees with selected faculty and students present, the Catholic and Lasallian identity of the College was affirmed and strategic plans addressed to ensure that the distinctly Catholic dimension of the College's mission will be realized and enhanced. The current administration certainly has been forthright and vigorous in taking steps to preserve the reputation of Manhattan as the premier Catholic college in the metropolitan area.

In short, it would seem that for the immediate future the Catholic identity of the College is secure. If, however, we look beyond the present to the decades ahead, I feel that there are some forces beyond our control and already at work that may force us to rethink the role for religion in the life of the College. Consider some of these forces.

For one thing, Catholic identity is becoming more difficult to define. There is a widening gap in the Church between traditionalists and progressives, between clerical privilege and demands for a lay voice in church governance, between official moral teaching and the actual practice of otherwise loyal Catholics. To call something or someone Catholic does not have the same unequivocal meaning it once did.

At Manhattan, the Catholic identity has been tied to its sponsorship by the [De La Salle] Christian Brothers. It is already clear that in the future there will be fewer and fewer of them, perhaps none at all. It is altogether possible that the next president of the College will not be a Brother. The preservation of Catholic identity will have to be the responsibility of dedicated Lasallian lay associates at every level of the College's life.

Fortunately, a good number of faculty and staff are deeply committed to certain aspects of De La Salle's vision. Some of them are deeply religious persons, not all of them are Catholics, and not all consider Catholicism as the focus of their enthusiasm for the Lasallian tradition. In

today's complex world, for some academics the word Catholic has negative or even threatening overtones that the word Lasallian does not. Lasallian associates, both Catholic and non-Catholic, are often attracted primarily to the Lasallian emphasis on social justice, quality teaching, and respect for students as persons. They may be willing to respect the Catholic context because the Lasallian ideal is so appealing and worthy of commitment.

Another significant development is in the population of the College, which is becoming more religiously diverse, while the leakage of Catholics from their traditional faith commitment continues to accelerate. As the College becomes more aggressive in striving for diversity by recruiting minority students and faculty, there is the likelihood that many will not be Catholics. What then will happen to our plans to increase participation in programs on Catholic culture? In addition, there is the difficulty of maintaining a commitment to academic freedom and yet restraining in the classroom criticism of Catholic teaching or expressions of unbelief or religious indifferentism.

A clue to what the future may hold is in this statement³ from the College's recently adopted strategic plan. Our Lasallian Catholic identity provides the College with its Core Belief, namely that we live in the presence of God, and its Core Value, namely, respect for the dignity of every member of our campus community. These underpin Manhattan's Core Principle ... sometimes referred to as our Caring Pluralistic Campus community to emphasize Manhattan's commitment to ecumenism and diversity. There is nothing specifically Catholic in that statement defining what is at the core, with the implication that the rest is peripheral, yet it affirms a belief, a value, and a principle that derive from religion.

I think we can assume that there will always be recognizable Catholic elements in the life of the College: courses in Catholic studies, opportunity for Catholic liturgical and devotional practice, awareness of our Catholic history and tradition. But it seems inevitable that these elements will impact a minority of faculty and students. Catholicism may no longer be at the core but at the periphery of the life of the College. That raises the question as to whether religion itself, broadly understood, can no longer be at the core of the College's self-understanding. I, for one, think not and hope not.

In this matter it is important to be clear about what we mean by religion. In its broadest meaning religion involves three basic elements: God, personal faith, and a faith community. The major religions all have different ways of understanding these terms. That is especially true of the way in which each religion envisions the mystery we call God and how the community expresses its faith in ritual, religious language, the implications for ethical living, and the ultimate meaning of human life.

This provides a kind of framework for what the future role of religion, as distinct from but not excluding Catholicism, might be and could be as central in the life of the College, both curricular and extracurricular. Academic courses, in religious studies as well as in other disciplines as appropriate, and student activities, whether devotional or socially oriented, might consciously address the following core topics:

1. the meaning of personal faith in the search for the meaning of human existence and the inevitability of death;

2. what and how we can know about the reality of the absolute and unfathomable mystery we call God in the light of expressions of belief and unbelief;
3. a critical study of the major religious traditions, including one's own, and their respective insights into the meaning of human life and death;
4. the ethical demands that religious faith makes upon a person's relationships to oneself, to other persons and to society;
5. appropriate opportunities for personal and communal expressions of religious faith.

Can such a program be called Lasallian? Does it relate to the vision of John Baptist de La Salle? I think it does if we realize that we can no longer replicate the specific measures he adopted in his day to bring his vision into reality. Leaving aside its seventeenth century French Catholic character, De La Salle's vision considered his schools as a milieu where students might come to a better understanding of the awesome mystery of who God is, of God's care for them, of God's presence to them. The integration of human learning and religion in the school was intended to help them make something of themselves and to find meaning in their daily lives. His schools aimed to motivate their behavior and so lead them to a better life in this world and their eternal destiny hereafter.

This has not been an easy topic to address, especially for those of us who have a long experience of Manhattan as Catholic and Lasallian. I think of it in terms of Plan A, Plan B, and Plan C. Plan A: some of us might want to see Catholicism at the College be restored to what it was years ago. Plan B: some might be happy to settle for the present affirmation of the Catholic and Lasallian character of the College and hope and plan so that it can be preserved and enhanced in the years ahead. I have suggested that there may have to be a Plan C in the years down the line. I hope when and if, that happens, John Baptist de La Salle will approve.

Endnotes

1. This talk was delivered by Brother Luke at Manhattan College on 9 April 2008.

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. Page 49.