

## **The Lasallian Educator in a Shared Mission**

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### **Introduction**

There is a statement in the New Testament that says that a prophet is not without honor except in his own country. When Jesus tried to say some startling things to the people of his hometown of Nazareth, they drove him out of the synagogue and threatened to throw him over a cliff. That gives me reason to worry as I return to the Albany area, "my own country" so to speak. I graduated from Christian Brothers Academy, where many of my classmates, especially the football players and band musicians came from La Salle School, and our closest rival both in military and athletic competitions was La Salle Institute. After all these years, it is a pleasure to return to the Capital District under such auspicious circumstances. But aware of what the Scripture says about the prophet, I've made arrangements to leave town and pursue other business as soon as this is over.

This gathering of distinguished Lasallian educators, in what I understand will be an annual event, takes place at a particularly important moment in the history of the De La Salle Christian Brothers. In Rome, just this past spring, and for the first time ever, our 42<sup>nd</sup> General Chapter, that deliberative body representative of the entire Institute, invited lay persons, men and women, to participate in its discussions and to have a voice in establishing policies on the mission of the Institute. The substance of these exchanges has been published in a message addressed to the global Lasallian Family on what we now call the shared mission. Having been involved in the discussions in Rome myself, in this presentation I should like to develop and nuance the ways in which the Lasallian Institute now understands the mission that we share.

### **The Person, the Achievement, and the Vision of De La Salle**

Before doing that, however, I think it important to say a word about what it means to be Lasallian. It seems to me that the only way to 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 all Christian teachers, both men and women. Some of you may already be familiar with the life story of De La Salle, but it might be useful to review the highlights. In this way, we will have a basis for reflection on the connection between what De La Salle achieved in the seventeenth century and what we are trying to achieve in the shared mission today.

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. After graduating *summa cum laude* from the University College in Rheims, he went on for graduate study in theology, was ordained a priest, and eventually earned the degree of Doctor of Theology in 1680.

At that moment, as a devout thirty-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 have 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 the parishes of the city. For these men, it was a living of sorts, at least until something better might come along. In those days, schoolteachers had no social or professional status, no standards to meet, and little motivation to stay with the job any longer than necessary. De La Salle himself tells us that when he first became interested in helping the teachers he considered them to be lower in status than his own valet. The leader of that little group in Rheims 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 poor 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 or 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 eventually able 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, 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 pastors were supposed to provide Charity Schools for their parishes, most of 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. True, there were some attempts in the seventeenth century to reform the parish charity schools, but these initiatives were widely scattered and had little permanent impact on the distressing educational scene. 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 John Baptist De La Salle had not been willing to put his own spiritual formation 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 hauled into court, condemned, and fined because the educational policies he introduced threatened to break down the established social barriers. In his determination to give rich and poor the same education in the same classroom, and all for free, he had to act 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 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 or pre-professional courses, unavailable, unheard of, and unthinkable in the colleges and universities. 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 Experience of the 42<sup>nd</sup> General Chapter**

The creative vision of this man has survived for more than 300 years and inspires 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. Such an opportunity presented itself when the 42<sup>nd</sup> General Chapter invited a representative group of our lay colleagues to come to Rome to discuss with the Brother delegates the Lasallian mission as it is presently shared.

For those of us who had been to General Chapters before, it was a moving and striking experience indeed to see the twenty lay consultants, as they were called, five of them women, seated among the Brothers in the Chapter Hall and in the commissions. Two full weeks were spent in the six commissions where Brothers and the consultants studied various aspects of the Lasallian mission. The reports and recommendations of the six commissions were then gathered together and given to a new commission formed to synthesize the results.

During the two days before they were scheduled to leave the General Chapter, the twenty consultants met with the newly formed shared mission commission to voice their impressions, their suggestions, and their criticisms to serve as input for the final documents to be prepared. This meeting was for the Brothers a powerful and existential experience of the competence, the commitment, and the honesty of this group representing so many of their lay colleagues throughout the Institute. The consultants were fulsome in their praise of the welcome they experienced at the Generalate in Rome, the sharing of community and prayer, and even the meals and moments of recreation together. They were also quite frank in noting both resistance and paternalism on the part of some Brothers. In particular, they expressed regret that the time provided would not allow them to see the work to its final conclusion. This was remedied in part by faxing to them for their reaction, drafts of the documents as they were being elaborated in the commission. During the final weeks of the General Chapter, the commission prepared and the General Chapter voted to approve a final report on shared mission and a message on shared mission addressed to the entire Lasallian Family.

One of the first issues to be clarified was the relationship between the Lasallian Family and the shared mission. The term Lasallian Family has been gaining currency throughout the Institute in recent years. The problem with it is that in some cases the term is so broad as to include anyone who ever heard of De La Salle, the whole spectrum from beginning students and their parents, to the teachers, the alumni, the Brothers, and almost anyone else. For others, especially in Latin countries, the Lasallian Family constitutes a very narrow group of lay associates who have been trained in the Lasallian tradition and who have made a formal religious commitment to carry it forward. In this country, however, there are Brothers and lay teachers who see problems with the family metaphor. Some families in our society are dysfunctional, and even in the best families there is always the danger of paternalism and sibling rivalry.

Because of this ambiguity, and because Lasallian family movements are in various stages of development in different parts of the world, the General Chapter decided to leave the Lasallian Family as a global and undefined umbrella term, and to concentrate instead on the shared mission. Shared mission is a fact, a lived and identifiable reality anywhere in the world. The

presence of the lay consultants at the General Chapter dramatized the existence of a discernable movement to share the educational mission that one of them described as “irresistible and irrevocable.”

## **The 42<sup>nd</sup> General Chapter and Shared Mission**

It would be impossible in a presentation such as this to do justice to all that the General Chapter had to say about shared mission. Let me try to elaborate a bit, the salient point under five headings: sharing, mission, spirituality, identity, and finally some problems to be faced.

### ***Sharing***

The first element in shared mission, and the one most often stressed is sharing. The mission is shared among Brothers, laymen and laywomen, members of other religious congregations, and sometimes priests. It wasn't easy to find a term to cover of all these categories. The General Chapter finally decided to use the term partners, which has some problems with it in English. In the United States, the Brothers prefer to refer to those who share the mission as colleagues. Eventually, it was left to each culture to use the term best suited to the local language and sensitivities.

More important than the term is the reality of sharing. The concept is nothing new. The revised *Rule* of the Brothers, approved by the 41<sup>st</sup> General Chapter in 1986, states very clearly, “The Brothers gladly associate lay persons with them in their educational mission.”<sup>3</sup> It goes on to specify, “The Brothers’ community is ever mindful that its apostolic activity takes place within an educational community in which all the functions, including positions of responsibility, are shared.”<sup>4</sup>

Based on this principle, the discussions in the most recent General Chapter emphasized that sharing the mission implies that each of the functions in mission are shared among equal partners. Specifically, that includes the process of planning for mission, the decision-making, implementation, and evaluation. If one group, for example the Brothers or a lay principal, monopolizes any one of these functions, then the mission is not truly shared. It was relatively easy to define the concept; making this total sharing an operational reality in all of our Lasallian institutions might be something that will take a bit more time.

One temptation that had to be faced was the thought that all this talk about shared mission is somehow in the category of “Plan B,” a practical necessity forced on us by the current shortage of Brothers. Wouldn't it be wonderful, as some might still think, if we could once again have Brothers' schools, run by the Brothers and staffed for the most part by Brothers, many of them young: to return, for example to what Christian Brothers Academy or La Salle Institute were like when I was in school.

The thinking of the General Chapter was to reject this idea, not only because it is unrealistic and nostalgic, but because it is contrary to the Lasallian spirit of faith that sees the action of God in the things that happen to us. In the passage already cited, De La Salle had to admit that he himself did not realize in the beginning where it was that God was leading him. All his life he

remained receptive to the action of divine providence in the challenging and often difficult circumstances of his life. The result was that he created something new to enrich the life of the Church.

That is why the General Chapter speaks of the shared mission as a grace from God, a grace for the Brothers, and a grace for those who are committed to sharing in the mission that the Church has entrusted to the Institute. In a Church that becomes more sensitive daily to the role that lay persons, men and women, should exercise in all facets of the Church's life, it is indeed a grace that the Lasallian Institute can recognize and affirm the increasing opportunities that lay persons have for an equal share in a mission that at one time was reserved for the most part to the vowed religious teachers.

### *Mission*

So far, my remarks have dealt with the notion of sharing. However difficult it may be to realize in practice, sharing is easy enough to understand. That is not quite so true about the second element, what it is that is shared, namely mission. In contemporary usage, the word mission has become devaluated and secularized. Mission statements abound. General Motors and IBM have a mission. So do SUNY and RPI.<sup>5</sup> One of the regrets expressed by the consultants at the General Chapter was that so much time had been devoted to the various aspects of sharing that not enough attention was paid to mission. Subsequently, this aspect of the topic was taken up by the General Chapter commission on shared mission. The final documents represent an attempt to balance the notion of sharing with the understanding that what is shared is a mission.

Mission, or being sent, in the Christian and theological sense is rooted in the mission whereby God so loved the world that he sent his only Son so that we may have life and have it in abundance. Jesus Christ, in turn, told his disciples representing the Church, that "As the Father has sent me, so also I send you." He promised, also to send the Spirit who would teach them all the truth. Mission, then, or being sent, is an extension of the overflow of the dynamism in the divine life. The persons of the Trinity are spoken of as being sent on a mission into the world to bring about God's kingdom, to accomplish God's will that everyone be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.

Not only is what is being shared in the Lasallian school a mission in the theological sense, but it is also a Lasallian mission in the historical sense. In his prayer, John Baptist de La Salle experienced what the Brothers call a double contemplation. On the one hand, he contemplated the goodness and awesome power of the divine will that all should be saved; on the other, he contemplated at first hand the situation of the neglected children of the poor. He saw how far they were from the salvation that God wanted for them.

Out of that double contemplation, De La Salle became aware that he had a mission from God to be a Founder. He realized that salvation for the young, the poor, and the disadvantaged could come from a community of teachers who would provide them with a human and Christian education in the Christian Schools. In time, the Church authenticated that mission and entrusted it to the Lasallian Institute. It is that mission that is shared today.

If mission in the Lasallian sense means being sent by God, this implies that persons are being sent, in this case the Lasallian educators; there are persons to whom they are sent, namely the students, especially the neglected and the poor; and those entrusted with the mission are being sent to contribute to God's plan in a specific way, namely by providing a human and Christian education in the schools. Let me offer a few reflections on each of these elements in mission.

The person being sent is the Lasallian educator. The first and most obvious thing to say about the Lasallian educator is that the Lasallian educator is a teacher, or at least someone whose service enables the teacher to be a teacher. De La Salle would never have gotten involved in education at all if he had not encountered that first little group of bedraggled schoolteachers. One of the major achievements of De La Salle was to transform the despised occupation of teaching school into a vocation and a ministry.

De La Salle recognized from the very start that if the teachers were to be effective in the classroom, they would have to see themselves and their teaching rather differently. He began by raising the level of their own education and developing in them, mostly through exchanges among themselves, a sense of professional competence and confidence. Little by little, as an organized curriculum and an administrative model for conducting the schools was developed, the teachers could begin to see the good results of their work.

But De La Salle had more than competent and effective teaching in mind. He was convinced that God had called him to establish the schools as part of God's plan for the abandoned street children. Therefore, the function of the teachers in the schools would be to represent Christ to the students, not only that they would be role models themselves, but that the students would learn from the teacher's example what it means to encounter the living Christ. From that perspective, teaching in a Christian School would be more than a job, more even than a profession, but a call to mission in the theological sense. That is one of the principal reasons why De La Salle did not want his Brothers to be priests. He considered the priesthood to be irrelevant and unnecessary for them, a distraction from the full-time responsibilities and the dignity of their mission to be Christian teachers.

The non-clerical aspect of the Lasallian educator has special relevance in the Church today. The De La Salle Brothers share with their colleagues living in the secular world a common vocation and status as lay persons. There are some signs that the tradition in the Church of clerical control and clerical privilege is at least being challenged and may be coming to an end. By virtue of their lay character, Lasallian educators have an opportunity to be in the forefront of movements to claim for the laity their rightful role in the governance and leadership of parishes and dioceses, as well as in the sacramental life of the Christian community. The promotion of the laity and the local church community has always been and continues to be an important concern of the Lasallian educator.

In his *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, John Baptist de La Salle pushes his language to the outer edges of orthodoxy when he tells the teachers, lay persons then as now, "You are ambassadors and ministers of Jesus Christ"<sup>6</sup> and, even more boldly, "The Church, whose ministers you are commissions you"<sup>7</sup>; and more boldly still, "You are the successors of the apostles in their task of catechizing and teaching the poor ... Thank God for the grace he has

given you in the work of sharing in the ministry of the great bishops and pastors of the Church.”<sup>8</sup> De La Salle was enough of a theologian not to identify the teaching ministry of the classroom with that of the bishop, but he comes awfully close.

De La Salle knew from his own experience that Christ himself would be a source of support for the teachers in their vocation. Thus the Founder tells them, “All your care for the children entrusted to you would be useless if Jesus Christ himself did not give the power, the quality, and the energy that is needed if your care for them is to be really useful.”<sup>9</sup>

When De La Salle speaks of the teacher as a minister of Jesus Christ for a mission, he means more than the teaching of religion. He wanted the schools to be penetrated with a religious spirit all day long. Important as religious instruction is, it does not mean that it is the only way, or even the best way, for an educator to share in the Lasallian mission. De La Salle never separated the teaching of religion and teaching the other school subjects. He was not interested in isolated catechetical centers or Sunday Schools for religious instruction. He realized that the school provides a unique opportunity to integrate religion and life, to develop in unison the full human and spiritual potential of the children the school would attract.

In his view, the entire teaching activity of the Lasallian educator is a ministry, a service in the name of the Gospel for the young people he described as “far from salvation.” He realized that it would not be enough to lead the neglected children of the poor to hope for salvation in the next world if something wasn’t done to bring them some hope of human betterment in this world. He knew that the Gospel of Jesus Christ had good news to offer for this world as well as for the next; that the Christian School was as much engaged in the struggle against human ignorance and injustice as against unbelief and sin.

Just about the best expression of the Lasallian tradition that teaching any subject constitutes an authentic ministry as part of the educational mission can be found in the *Declaration* issued by the 39<sup>th</sup> General Chapter in 1967:

It is true to say that [Lasallian educators] exercise a ministry whenever they truly educate. It is apostolic to awaken in students a serious attitude toward life and a conviction of the greatness of the destiny of every human being; it is apostolic to make it possible for them, with intellectual honesty and responsibility, to experience the autonomy of personal thought; it is apostolic to help the students to use their liberty to overcome their own prejudices, preconceived ideas, social pressures, as well as the pressures that come from the disintegration within the human person; it is apostolic to dispose students to use their intelligence and their training in the service of their fellow human beings, to open them to others, to teach them how to listen and try to understand, to trust, and to love; it is apostolic to instill in students, a sense of trustworthiness, brotherhood, and justice.

That, it seems to me, is what anyone of us can do and actually do, no matter what subject we teach, or if perhaps we serve the cause of education in a non-teaching function. The entire educational enterprise is thus tied in to ministry and mission.

But the educational enterprise cannot be a mission and a ministry unless there are persons to whom the minister is sent. Teachers do not merely teach subject areas; they teach the persons we call the students. If De La Salle was concerned to transform the image of the teacher, it was principally because he realized the need of strong role models for the students, for the most part neglected young people. The Founder wanted his teachers to be totally immersed in the life of the students, sharing their interests, their worries and their hopes. He expected the students to see in their teachers concerned adults who would know them by name, who would help them to see themselves in their dignity as children of God, and from whom they might have their first proof of God's love for them in an experience of genuine human and disinterested love. As we all know, you can fool some of the students some of the time, but not very often and not for long. Whether or not this or that teacher really cares about them is something they will discover soon enough. On that perception depends the ultimate success or failure of teaching as a mission.

The clientele in De La Salle's day, in religious terms those to whom the teachers were sent on a mission, were mostly the sons of the artisans and the poor. As the reputation of the Christian Schools grew, the emphasis on a solid and practical education in a disciplined atmosphere began to attract the sons of the lesser bourgeoisie, shopkeepers, skilled workers and the like. Instruction was gratuitous for all; all were treated alike so that neither resources nor privilege could have any influence on the teacher or on the running of the school. Instruction could then be centered on the person of the student, not on what he had or where he came from.

It is, first of all, to poor and disadvantaged young people that the Lasallian educator is sent. An awareness of this tradition remains today a matter of priority in the Lasallian mission that is now being shared. This mission to the poor may take the form of direct service of deprived youth and the economically poor, as in La Salle School, for example, or in indirect service in academies such as Christian Brothers and La Salle where students can be sensitized to the situation of the poor and educated in the principles of social justice.

We might also reflect that it was not only the poverty of the children that impelled De La Salle to act on their behalf. He consistently emphasizes the fact that they were "neglected, left to themselves, and badly brought up," due to the fact that both parents had to work to make ends meet. This neglect is surely a reality today for a large percentage of the students in every one of the schools represented here. Working parents, divorced parents, single parent families, and broken homes, all provide a clientele of neglected young people at least as much as it did in the Founder's Day.

### *Spirituality*

This rather lengthy commentary on the all-important topic of mission brings us to our third major point, which is spirituality. From all that has been said thus far, it should be clear that sharing the Lasallian mission, precisely because it is a mission, the work of God, means sharing also in the distinctive Lasallian spirituality. De La Salle is very explicit on what that spirit or spirituality is: "The spirit of this Institute," he writes in Chapter Two of the primitive *Rule*, "is first a spirit of faith ... Secondly, the Spirit of the Institute consists in an ardent zeal for the religious education of young people." These are not two distinct spirits; zeal is but an aspect of the spirit of faith from which it flows.

The Lasallian educator with a sense of mission is therefore and necessarily a religious person. That idea may scare some people, but it shouldn't. Religiousness need not be confused with religiosity – Church attendance, devotional practices, adherence to Church teachings, and the like – however important these expressions of religion may be to many people. Sharing in Lasallian spirituality does not mean either that lay colleagues are expected to adopt the lifestyle of professed religious living in community. In basing his spirituality on the spirit of faith, De La Salle intended something more profound than any merely external manifestation of religious faith.

Rather, in his writing on the spirit of faith, De La Salle urges his followers to develop a faith vision that would enable them to see beyond appearances. He wanted his educators to be able to find God, that is, ultimate meaning and value, in those “little monsters” they faced every day in the classroom, in their often “crotchety colleagues,” in their personal and professional failures as well as their success, in the reversals that beset the Lasallian enterprise as well as in its providential growth, in material deprivation as well as in the richness of associating together in an educational community.

In Lasallian spirituality, then, the spirit of faith has to do with the perception of value, ultimate value. The spirit of faith gives the Lasallian educator an uncanny ability always to suspect that in persons and events there is more than meets the eye. To catch a glimpse of the divine spark that is hidden beneath the external appearance of the most unlikely carriers of divinity.

The spirit of faith that characterizes the Lasallian educator is not something that can be taken for granted; it has to be cultivated. In order to see persons and events as God sees them, the Lasallian educator must learn how to be in touch with God, that is, to pray. Prayer in this sense is not the same as saying prayers; it is more meditative, more personal. It is the discovery of the divine spark within oneself. It takes place when we open ourselves up to that something “more” that always seems to be just beyond us. Saying formal prayers can help, of course, especially in communal and liturgical prayer that breaks through the formulas and routine to become itself an authentic faith experience. The spirit of faith can also be nourished by the kind of reading that we do, reading that forces the right questions on us, that challenges us to come to grips with who we are and the ultimate reason for what we are doing.

The Lasallian educator possessed of such a spirit of faith cannot help but want to share it. Lasallian spirituality, then, is characterized, not by a monastic or otherworldly faith that rests in contemplation, but a faith that overflows into zeal for the educational mission.

De La Salle calls this an ardent zeal, a zeal that burns, that sets us on fire. That isn't easy to experience day after day in the classroom, as we all know. That is why De La Salle calls it a spirit of zeal. It suggests something more than merely being zealous, keeping busy all day, doing one's job, earning one's pay. Neither does the spirit of zeal, even zeal rooted in faith, refer primarily to a crusading zeal to get the students to go to Church, or to stay away from drugs, or to bring their sexual urges under reasonable control.

Rather the zeal of the Lasallian educator is an insistent and a dynamic urge to want to share the best of oneself with the students: to communicate one's sense of ultimacy, in other words, to share one's faith; to share what one knows and has experienced; to put one's personal values and vision into creative tension with those of the students. The spirit of zeal drives the Lasallian educator to make the students aware that their lives have meaning and value.

The Lasallian spirituality that is a necessary part of the shared mission is thus an apostolic or missionary spirituality, a spirituality rooted in that deep and personal religious sense we call the spirit of faith. It is a spirituality with an outward thrust in an ardent zeal for the religious well-being of the students, for their salvation in this world and in the next.

### ***Identity and Vocation***

A fourth major concern associated with shared mission is identity and vocation. Once the 42<sup>nd</sup> General Chapter began to see the implications of the shared mission and the concomitant shared spirituality, the question arose as to the identity of the religious Brother and the identity of the married or single laypersons in the context of their families and relationships. In other words, there are some things that are not shared. The Brothers live their vowed religious vocation in a community with its distinctive practices and lifestyle. Priests and other religious who share the Lasallian mission have a distinctive vocation and lifestyle of their own. So also do married and single laypersons living in families or other relationships. Rather than suppressing the identity of these vocations, the shared mission dramatizes the distinctive characteristics of each, as well as the mutual respect for the vocation of the other that the shared mission and the shared spirituality should engender.

Each of these vocations has something distinctive to bring to the mission. The Brothers have been well described as “the heart, the memory, and the guarantors of the Lasallian charism.” Priests and other religious manifest the values in their particular way of being Church. Married people and single lay people have a special opportunity to witness to the values in a vocation that most of the students will eventually embrace. As the General Chapter message on the shared mission puts it, “Brothers and colleagues, united in Saint John Baptist de La Salle for the temporal and eternal well-being of the young, let us become involved together in the evangelization of our local culture. Let us welcome and support the different vocations of lay people, Sisters, Brothers, and priests.”

### ***Some Problems to Be Faced***

The fifth aspect of this shared mission that merits at least some brief mention concerns the problems that lurk behind the idealistic and spiritual elements discussed thus far. If the shared Lasallian mission is to become all that it can be, there are some attitudinal and structural problems that have yet to be overcome.

There are, for example, those among the Brothers who remain unenthusiastic and reluctant to accept the idea of the shared mission. While accepting the reality of shared mission as inevitable, they resent the intrusion of persons who are not Brothers into an educational enterprise and its leadership functions over which they once held a monopoly. Some laypersons who are not

Brothers likewise show reluctance when they feel they are being coopted into a Lasallian and religious movement that is a threat to their personal autonomy and the autonomy of their field of specialization. To overcome these forms of hesitation, the General Chapter has recognized the need for solid programs of training and formation in the shared mission. Fortunately, Lasallian programs for Brothers and lay colleagues have been in place for some time in the New York Province of the Brothers. But both the Brothers generally and their lay colleagues still have a lot to learn about what the shared Lasallian mission is and what it is not.

Another question that the General Chapter had to address was how those who are not Catholics or, as happens in some Lasallian enterprises, those who are not Christians, can share in a mission entrusted by the Catholic Church to the Institute of John Baptist de La Salle. This brought the General Chapter to realize that every baptized Christian is called to mission by the very nature of baptism itself. And then, as the Second Vatican Council has insisted, the Spirit of God is at work in all the world religions where the values typical of the Christian and Lasallian spirit can be found. Enough has been said already about the spirituality of faith and zeal to make clear that the Lasallian spirit is broad enough to be operative in a positive way in any truly religious context.

Finally, there is the unresolved question of degrees of commitment to the Lasallian mission and structures to express the gradation. Anyone associated with a Lasallian educational enterprise participates, by the very fact, in its mission independently of any personal attitude toward it. It would be unthinkable to engage a person in a Lasallian institution that would be totally opposed to what the tradition stands for. Yet there is certainly no determination on the part of the Brothers to force people into sharing a vision or a spirituality that they cannot understand or assimilate as their own. Since the mission itself is in fact shared, the Brothers do want to share with those who are willing as much of the Lasallian tradition and charism as is compatible with each person's religious beliefs and vocational commitment.

As forms of association and sharing in the mission develop, it seems inevitable that the Brothers' Institute will have to face different ways of structuring the various levels of commitment in what has been called the Lasallian Family. Are there possibilities for degrees of membership in the Institute itself? Would some persons who are not Brothers want to solemnize their commitment, for a shorter or longer period? Could we develop some ritual modeled on the vows expressed in the Founder's day that focused on mission without reference either to poverty or chastity? Would it become possible for young men, and young women even, to enter the Institute without being required eventually to take perpetual vows? In other words, as we learn to share the mission and the spirituality, is there any compelling reason why we must make such a sharp distinction between those who are members of the Institute and those who are not?

These are not questions that can be resolved right now, but they do provide some food for thought as to what the future might hold. Remember that John Baptist de La Salle did not know what he was getting into when he became involved with the schoolmasters. Maybe neither do we as we begin to take seriously the idea of shared mission. The truth of the matter may be that the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools instead of getting smaller may in fact be getting bigger.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I think I have given you more than enough to think about as Lasallian educators: the life and vision of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, your patron as teachers; the attention given by the 42<sup>nd</sup> General Chapter to shared mission, including not only the reality of sharing but the mission and spirituality that is shared; the need for mutual respect among the distinct vocations and religious beliefs of those who share; and finally some problems connected with shared mission that have yet to be faced and dealt with. As the General Chapter message on shared mission says so tellingly, “God is calling each one of us according to his or her own vocation to accomplish together the mission confided to Saint John Baptist de La Salle and to the Institute he founded.”

## Endnotes

1. These remarks were delivered on 8 October 1993 at a gathering of teachers from Christian Brothers Academy, La Salle Institute, and La Salle School in the Capital District (the metropolitan area surrounding Albany, the capital of the State of New York).

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 39<sup>th</sup>, 40<sup>th</sup>, 41<sup>st</sup>, and 42<sup>nd</sup> 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. *Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (1987), article #17.

4. *Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (1987), article #17a.

5. The State University of New York (SUNY) in Albany and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) in Troy are two institutions of higher education also located in the Capital District.

6. John Baptist de La Salle’s *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, # 3.

7. John Baptist de La Salle’s *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, # 7.

8. John Baptist de La Salle’s *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, # 8.

9. John Baptist de La Salle’s *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, # 3.