

The Lasallian School and the Ministry of Education in the Church

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The remarks that follow have been billed as a keynote address for a workshop that is to deal with the characteristics of Lasallian schools. In view of the mix of those participating, it has been suggested that this first presentation give some attention to the role of the laity in the Church and in Catholic education. In an attempt to combine the two themes, I should like first to make some remarks about the Lasallian school and then broaden the topic to speak of the role of lay persons in the Church in general and in Catholic education in particular.

You have in your hands the excellent brochure entitled *Characteristics of Lasallian Schools*.³ In the words of the introduction, it is the result of a collaborative effort of nearly 150 Brothers and their lay associates to produce "a foundational and consensual document for the entire Lasallian system." The present workshop is structured according to the three characteristics highlighted in the document: the teacher as a minister of grace; association; and the management of the schools. This will surely provide enough agenda to keep the participants busy, not only for the next couple of days, but also for years to come.

Excellent as this document may be both in its content and in its presentation, I must say honestly that I am not entirely satisfied with it. The characteristics cited are indeed central to the educational vision of Saint John Baptist de La Salle who founded the Institute of the Brothers. The well-chosen excerpts from his writings make that rather clear. But there is a vast difference between what De La Salle meant by these terms and the way we interpret them today.

De La Salle was original and even daring in his use of the term ministry to describe the mission of the teachers in his schools. But this term had not developed the layers of meaning that it has come to signify in the Church today. The word ministry has re-entered our Roman Catholic vocabulary only recently, and not without some controversy as it applies to lay persons, including religious Brothers and Sisters.

Association is at the heart of what the Founder envisioned as the cohesive element in the Society of the Brothers; but he had neither the need, the opportunity, nor the desire to extend it to secular laymen living in what he called "the world." For him the avoidance of contact with seculars was an essential means to preserve the spirit of community and union among the Brothers within his Institute.

It is true that the treatise entitled *The Management of the Schools*,⁴ first published a year after the Founder's death, was the result of a collaborative effort between De La Salle and some of the "principal Brothers" as he called them; and it was indeed based on their common teaching experience. Yet it was intended to impose a rather rigid uniformity throughout all the Brothers' schools in France in matters of school policy, curriculum, methodology, and discipline for a

body of teachers who had neither the education nor the experience to work these things out for themselves.

The authors of the *Characteristics* document have wisely chosen to take these three characteristics, broaden them, and apply them in new and creative ways to the situations and challenges that we meet in the schools today. In doing so they are following the policy set forth by the 39th General Chapter of the Brothers in its 1966 *Declaration* on the Brothers of the Christian Schools in the World Today:

Fidelity to the present moment of history and fidelity to the Founder, far from opposing or excluding each other, are closely related, provided we do not expect Saint John Baptist de La Salle to have known in advance all our problems and the answers to all our questions ... Fidelity to the specific intentions of the Founder and to the tradition of the Institute is confided to us as living men. It is we who carry on the task of discerning how fidelity to his charism can be lived in the present time.⁵

That is what the authors of the document before you have done in a truly remarkable fashion.

My personal reservations, therefore, have nothing to do with the revisions and the updating of the Founder's thought. That is inevitable, necessary, and all to the good. The problem, as I see it, is that the three characteristics that have been isolated and developed to some extent in the brochure might just as easily be applied to any institution devoted to education in a Christian context. Would schools conducted by Jesuits, religious women, diocesan authorities, other orders of Brothers, or even Lutherans for that matter, want to emphasize anything different?

For that reason, and no doubt for less worthy motives as well, I would prefer to return to six characteristics of the Lasallian school that I attempted to isolate in an earlier address given at Manhattan College on the occasion of the 1980 tercentennial celebrations.⁶ A brief summary is available in the item listed under my name in the bibliography of the brochure.

The six characteristics of the Lasallian schools enumerated in that address were the following: sensitivity to social issues, religious education, excellence in teaching, quality education, emphasis on the practical, and a certain independent distance from Church authority. Obviously, most of these six characteristics can be subsumed under one or another of the three that will occupy your attention for the next two days. It will certainly be easier to focus on three rather than six. Nonetheless, I would like to highlight two of the original six that might otherwise be lost in the generalities.

The first of the six characteristics that I would like to rescue from oblivion is, to my mind, truly distinctive. It is the last in the list, and it is the one that provoked the most controversy in the subsequent discussion. There has been a good bit of resistance among the Brothers to having their schools characterized by a "certain independent distance from Church authority." After all, our schools are Catholic schools with a capital C, to some extent supported by the dioceses and the parishes, and to an even greater extent by the Catholic community at large. Our schools were established, and I presume still aim, to turn out good practicing Catholics. How, then, does it make sense to speak of some kind of independent distance from Church authority?

It might help to avoid any misunderstandings if we nuance and re-word this particular characteristic a bit. What is really meant is a relative distance from the clericalism that surrounds much of the exercise of authority in the Church? To my mind, this point is fundamental. It derives from a long tradition that goes back to the time of De La Salle and his imbroglios with the parish and diocesan authorities of his day. Too many of them did not understand his work in the schools and so tried either to control it, to change it into something other, or to suppress it altogether. Even De La Salle's unquestioning submission to the authority of Rome and his intense loyalty to the Holy See can be interpreted in part as a way of freeing his young Society from the interference of local hierarchs. That is why he came to see early on that the Institute had to remain exclusively lay if it were to survive.

With this in view, the Founder did all he could to keep the Brothers at the farthest possible removed from the clerical establishment. He designed a distinctively un-clerical looking religious habit. It was forbidden to the Brothers to teach or study Latin. They were allowed to function in parish liturgies only as the supervision of their pupils required and they could not wear the surplice nor were they allowed to sing in the Church choir. In addition, the Brothers were warned to steer clear of theological controversies and to stick to the straightforward doctrine of the catechism.

In short, while respect for authority and the clergy, especially for the dignity of the priesthood, were strongly inculcated in the Brothers and in the students, the *Rule* and the tradition required that the Brothers be distinguished from the clergy in all that pertains to clerical privilege, ambition, lifestyle, and dress.

Over the centuries, some of the specifics and most of the defensiveness in this attitude have been considerably modified. This is particularly the case in English-speaking countries where people generally tend to identify the Brothers with the clergy. Indeed, some Brothers think of themselves that way especially when it comes to clerical privilege and exemptions of various kinds. Perhaps our formal street dress contributes somewhat to that image. Our confreres in France, for example, who think of themselves as the sole guardians of the tradition of the Institute, are scandalized by the clerical look of the black suit and collar that we wear in this country. They call this outfit "clergyman" with a French accent that leaves no doubt about its pejorative connotations.

A more fundamental reason for the tendency to distinguish the Brothers from other lay Christians is the commitment of the Brothers by vow to live out their consecration in a celibate lifestyle. At one time, this form of religious life was called the "state of perfection," based on a long tradition going back to Saint Paul that considered virginity more perfect than the married state. Since the Second Vatican Council, however, with its insistence that all Christians in whatever state are called to the perfection of holiness, vowed religious need no longer claim or pretend that they are somehow "holier than thou." Saints and sinners, the strong and the weak, committed and lukewarm Christians are to be found on both sides of the monastic enclosure. The differences in lifestyle can now be thought of less in terms of separation and more in terms of complementary and interdependent ways of living out the Christian Gospel.

There is another recent development among the Brothers that might seem to be going in the direction of an increasing involvement in the clerical dimension of Church life. Just prior to the Second Vatican Council some few Brothers were sent to earn advanced degrees in sacred theology. Since that time, the number of Brothers with professional training in this field, previously the exclusive domain of the clergy, has increased significantly. In addition, Brothers have become active in many aspects of Church ministry outside the classroom: in spiritual direction for adults, in campus ministry centers, in schools and colleges, and in parishes as lectors, acolytes, leaders of song, extraordinary Eucharistic ministers and even, here and there, as homilists despite the canonical ban. Such activities were explicitly forbidden by the Founder and in the subsequent tradition of the Institute. Even today, some Brothers view these developments with suspicion, precisely because they seem to be moving the Institute closer to clerical status.

I, for one, do not agree with such an interpretation, perhaps because I am personally involved. It seems to me that the intrusion of the Brothers into fields of study and ministries once reserved for the ordained clergy is not at all abandonment of their lay character, or of their lay colleagues, to seek the greener grass on the other side of the fence. On the contrary, these developments can be seen and are, in reality, ways of setting precedents and supporting movements to win for all the laity their rightful place in the leadership of the Church.

With those concessions in mind, it remains true that a respectful distance from the clerical centers of authority is an important characteristic of the Brothers' tradition. The same is pretty much the case from the other side as well. Brothers, in general, are not privy to the inner workings of the diocese or the Roman curia. For the most part, we are left alone "to do our own thing." We frequently get lost in the cracks between the "reverend Fathers," the "beloved Sisters," and the "devoted laity." Quite simply, we are not part of the clerical club and most of us prefer it that way.

There is another characteristic of the Brothers' schools in that famous list of six that needs a few words of comment here. I refer to excellence in teaching. It is true that this characteristic is implicit in the three that form the basis of this workshop. It is also true that any educational institution worthy of the name shares this element.

For the Brother, however, commitment to teaching and to being good at it is at the very heart of his vocation. It is one of the major contributions of De La Salle. He transformed the lowly and despised function of schoolmaster, which in his day required no preparation and was not even a marketable skill, into a genuine professional and religious vocation, worthy of the dedication of a lifetime. The vocation of the teaching educator for the Brother is no temporary vocation. It is not considered a way to gain pastoral experience before moving on to something else, as in some orders of priests, nor is it a short cut to ecclesiastical preferment, as is the policy in some dioceses. It is this aspect that gives the excellent teaching in the Lasallian tradition its special character.

Both of the characteristics that I have singled out for special attention – distance from the clerical establishment and a permanent commitment to teaching – are qualities that the Brothers share with their lay colleagues. This fact provides the basis for a smooth transition to the main theme of this address, namely, the importance of the laity in the Church and in Catholic education.

It would be foolhardy and futile in this context to attempt a full analysis of the role of the laity in the Church: what it has been, what it is, and what it ought to be. The best that can be attempted here is to address some remarks to one aspect of the question, namely, the role of the laity in Catholic education.

In a sense, that issue has already been settled in practice. The simple fact is, that at least in this country, Catholic education is already to a large extent in the hands of lay persons who are neither priests nor members of religious institutes. The sharp distinction once made between the so-called religious faculty and the so-called lay faculty is rapidly breaking down. Lay teachers are no longer a temporary expedient in an emergency situation. They are an absolute necessity if the system is to survive.

It happens more and more often that it is the lay staff and not the individual priests or religious that give to a particular school its stability and continuity in its tradition. The quality of Catholic education has been improved by what the lay teachers have contributed by way of academic credentials, teaching skills, professional development, and creativity in curriculum reform. At long last, positions of responsibility and leadership are being assigned to the laity in ever increasing numbers. In short, the lay person in the Catholic school in the United States has finally come of age.

As this situation has evolved, it has become increasingly clear to the Institute of the Brothers that it ought to be so. The revised *Rule*, approved by the recent General Chapter⁷ in Rome and submitted to the Vatican for definitive approval, reminds the Brothers that theirs is a shared mission. Article 17 states:

Ever since the time of their foundation, the Brothers have contributed to the promotion of the Christian laity, especially among those educators who want their professional work to be a form of Gospel ministry ... they assist their lay colleagues in becoming more deeply involved in the work of the Church in the field of education.⁸

The implications are drawn in Article 17a that follows:

The Brothers' community is ever mindful that its apostolic activity takes place in the framework of an educational community in which all the functions, including therefore positions of responsibility, are shared.⁹

Pope John Paul II echoed this idea in his address to the General Chapter delegates when he received them in private audience last May.¹⁰ He said on that occasion:

I wholeheartedly encourage the Brothers in all their schools to work in close concert with the lay people who share the Lasallian ideal. You need the collaboration of men and women of quality who can contribute greatly to the vitality of your institutions ... The responsibility for Christian education has to be borne by everyone.

In a recent article in *America*,¹¹ Father Theodore Hesburgh of Notre Dame makes a rather startling proposal. He suggests that the administration of the entire system of Catholic elementary and secondary education in this country be turned over to the laity. This would relieve the religious institutes of men and women from the burden of trying to maintain the large institutions that they originally founded. Their most active and dynamic personnel, though fewer in number, could then be released for the service of the Catholic poor who could not afford the cost of quality education under lay auspices.

Radical as it sounds, this is not very far from what is proposed in Article 33a of the Brothers' revised *Rule*:

The Districts and Regions establish a plan for the development of their apostolic works that will bring about a situation where the direct service of the poor becomes more and more their effective priority.

Such a plan provides ways to recruit or train replacements that will permit Brothers to be released for such service.¹²

Article 19a of the revised *Rule* applies the same principle to missionary service:

As a response to this missionary call, the Brothers offer themselves to be sent by the Institute to places where there is more urgent need for their services. In such a case, it could even happen that the Brothers would have to confide their present work to others, in order to free themselves to meet such demands.¹³

At the present time, there seems to be a great resistance to such a policy on the part of the Brothers as well as their lay associates. The attitude seems to be that the Brothers are needed in the schools, that much good is being accomplished, and that the integration of lay personnel is working well.

If the more radical approach of the General Chapter and the *Rule* is ever to become a reality, in other words, if the Brothers are ever to be willing to hand over to lay persons the full responsibility for carrying on the Lasallian tradition, a radical conversion will be required. That is precisely what the 41st General Chapter is calling for in the attitude of the Brothers and the whole Lasallian Family.

A start could be made by a greater effort to immerse the Brothers and their lay associates in the thought and spirituality of John Baptist de La Salle. This would be followed by a gradual transition whereby the control and operation of the schools would be handed over by the Brothers to their lay successors. In a final stage, the majority of the Brothers would then be assigned to educational work for the marginalized. Presumably, the profession of poverty and the flexibility that comes from a celibate lifestyle would allow the Brothers to go into situations where their married colleagues with family responsibilities would be in no position to follow.

Although I doubt very much whether we are prepared to think this way, it is possible that circumstances may force the issue. There seems to be evidence that something like this may

already be developing in Catholic education in this country. If and when the laity are entrusted with the full responsibility for the schools, there might well be advantages all around. The priests would be free to exercise the ministries proper to their ordination; teaching congregations of men and women will have recovered some of the apostolic drive that characterized their original foundation; and finally, the evolution of the role of the laity in Catholic education will have come to its full term.

Whether we consider the involvement of the laity in Catholic education in terms of the total operational control that may be in store for the future, or the present situation in this country where the majority of the personnel in Catholic schools are lay, either alternative has interesting and important implications for the role of the laity generally in the Church.

Most of the traditional writing on this subject has been willing to concede to the laity a distinctive mission in the world. Karl Rahner put it as well as anyone almost twenty-five years ago when he noted that the lay person “allows the Church to be present in her most essential nature ... where no one else can represent the Church, not even the clergy, and yet where the Church must be.”¹⁴ Since the Second Vatican Council, however, there has been an increasing realization that the laity has an active and essential role, not only in the Church’s mission to the world, but also within the structure of the Church itself.

The fundamental theological reason for this development is the teaching of the Second Vatican Council that the word Church applies in the first instance to the entire People of God, and that the guidance of the Holy Spirit is active in the whole Church and not just in the hierarchy. This is important when we come to consider the teaching ministry in the Church, the Latin word for which is *magisterium*. Not many are aware that the use of this scary Latin term to refer exclusively to the official teaching of the Church hierarchy dates back only to the last century. Teaching ministry or magisterium in its broader meaning has a much longer history. Over the centuries, teaching ministry has been exercised in a variety of ways and by an array of agents with varying degrees of extrinsic and intrinsic authority.

The teaching ministry of Jesus is the model for every other teaching ministry in the Church where all the teachers must learn “to teach as Jesus did.” In *I Corinthians*, Saint Paul distinguishes the charism of teachers from that of the apostles and ranks teachers near the top of his list. He reserves a place for the administrators near the end. Saint Thomas Aquinas applies the term magisterium primarily to those licensed to teach theology. He prefers juridical and pastoral language to describe the teaching function of bishops. It should not be forgotten that Teresa of Avila and Catherine of Siena – women and lay religious – are officially designated as Doctors, that is teachers, of the Church. A century ago, Cardinal Newman could write an important essay on consulting the faithful in matters of doctrine. There might be fewer tensions in the Church today if some of his insights had been taken more seriously by Church officials.

The question, then, is not whether the laity shares in the teaching ministry, but how the teaching ministry of lay persons is exercised. It should be made clear at once that there is no claim that lay teachers at any level of education can teach authoritatively in the name of the Church, as bishops do. On the other hand, teaching of any kind cannot be called teaching in the true sense of the

word, much less a service or ministry, if it is limited to the memorization of formulas or mere indoctrination.

Teachers have to be open: open to learning and the search for the truth; open to unexpected sources for insight into the truth; open to new ways to express and formulate truth already possessed; above all, open to the needs, the preoccupations, and the unique personhood of those being taught. Lay teachers know from experience what it is to teach. When they bring these qualities to their teaching, including especially the teaching of the Gospel message, then their teaching becomes a genuine ministry and their role in the teaching ministry of the Church becomes indispensable.

A summary remark should suffice at this point by way of conclusion. Despite the reluctance in certain conservative quarters to concede to the laity any genuine and significant ministerial role in the Church, it is evident from our experience in this country, that the laity do have such a role, especially in the ministry of Catholic education. It has been the purpose of this presentation to relate this role to the distinctive characteristics of the Lasallian school – with special reference to a relative distance from a dominant clericalism and a full-time dedication to teaching as a vocation. These aspects of the Lasallian tradition challenge the Brothers and their lay colleagues to work out, together and by association, a plan for the management of the schools that will transform the education that takes place there into an authentic ministry of grace.

Endnotes

1. This talk was delivered at a Lasallian Schools Workshop of the New York District of the Brothers of the Christian Schools that was held in Haverstraw, New York, from 8 to 10 October 1986.

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. Cf. *Characteristics of Lasallian Schools* by the Regional Education Committee of the [De La Salle] Christian Brothers (Christian Brothers Conference, 1986).

4. Cf. *The Conduct of the Schools* by John Baptist de La Salle and translated by François de la Fontainerie (New York: McGraw Hill, 1935). [Also, *The Conduct of the Christian Schools* by John Baptist de La Salle (Lasallian Publications, 1996)]

5. *The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today: A Declaration* (Rome, 1967), #7.1.

6. Cf. “De La Salle and His Brothers: An Adventure in Education” by Luke Salm, which is now made available in this issue of *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* Vol. 8, No. 1 (2017).

7. The 41st General Chapter of the Brothers of the Christian Schools was held in the spring of 1986.

8. *Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (Rome, 1987), #17.

9. *Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (Rome, 1987), #17a.

10. May 1986 (41st General Chapter of the Brothers of the Christian Schools).

11. 4 October 1986.

12. *Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (Rome, 1987), #33a.

13. *Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (Rome, 1987), #19a.

14. Karl Rahner, *Nature and Grace* (Sheed and Ward, 1963), page 97.