

What Does a Lasallian Educator Do?

Luke Salm, FSC²

The subject assigned to this presentation is: What Does a Lasallian Educator Do? The answer is obvious: The Lasallian educator educates. In an audience such as this, it might well be presumed that there is enough intelligence and expertise to know all that implies.

The theme of the workshop is broader: Sharing the Lasallian Vision. How this presentation relates to the theme may not be quite so obvious. There is that word "Lasallian" again. It now enjoys a vogue that it did not have even a few years ago. Only recently have we been able to agree on how to spell it. The word may now be in danger of becoming a buzz word or, perhaps, a fuzz word. The word becomes even fuzzier when we speak of a Lasallian vision. That foresees the visionary, the obscure, the ephemeral, the vision open to annual revision.

The way out of this is to realize that the vision, if it is to be Lasallian, is rooted in a tradition. Therefore, sharing the vision must mean sharing the tradition. The most recent General Chapters [of the Brothers of the Christian Schools] have tried to convince the Brothers that we do have a tradition from the past and a vision for the future that are worth sharing. Now we have to convince ourselves and our colleagues in educational ministry that we are willing to share the tradition and the vision.

The tradition is Lasallian because it is rooted in the life, the personality, the accomplishments, and the writings of John Baptist de La Salle. The vision is Lasallian because it is modeled on the vision of John Baptist de La Salle who was able to create something fresh and vital in the field of education. His was a practical vision that led him to seize with vigor and determination new opportunities in an educational climate that was weighed down by complacency and cliché. All of us, then, as Lasallian educators, are part of that tradition and share in that vision.

The vision part of it, however, is not the topic I have been asked to address. The two G's who planned this workshop, Gary and Gery, the York and the Short of it,³ keep telling me that they want this session to be practical: Get down to the brass tacks, the nitty-gritty, as soon as possible! Tell them what a Lasallian educator does, with a capital DO! To be honest with you, I can't really do that. It is not up to me to tell you how to organize your programs, how to get through the school day, or how to deal with unruly adolescents. You will have to do that for yourselves. This is supposed to be a workshop. I'm willing to do my part of the work; you will have to do yours.

The best contribution I can make to the work of the workshop is to probe the Lasallian vocabulary to find some clues as to what the Lasallian educator does. In the process, it will become clear that there is a necessary connection between what the Lasallian educator is and what the Lasallian educator does. With this in mind, I should like to examine four words in the vocabulary of John Baptist de La Salle that have been particularly forceful in shaping the image

of the Lasallian educator. De La Salle described the Lasallian educator as a Brother, possessed of a certain spirit, dedicated to the ministry of teaching in the framework of a Christian School.

It should be noted at the outset that this approach involves a real hermeneutical problem. First, we must have some idea of what this language meant during the years from 1680 until the death of the Founder in 1719. Then, from 1719 until rather recently, the traditional description of the Lasallian educator was considered to apply only to the Brothers. If the Lasallian vocabulary is to have any meaning in a workshop such as this, our hermeneutical or interpretative principle will have to avoid two traps: anachronism and exclusivism.

To warn us away from anachronism, we have the *Declaration* on the Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today (1967). That document, from the 39th General Chapter of the Brothers, has this to say about fidelity to the Founder and fidelity to the present age:

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 answer to all our questions ... Fidelity to the specific intentions of the Founder and to the tradition of the Institute is entrusted to us as living men. It is we who carry on the task of discovering how fidelity to his charism can be lived in the present time.⁴

Our traditional exclusivism is effectively abandoned in the new *Rule* of the Brothers, adopted at the 41st General Chapter in 1986 and subsequently approved in the Vatican. Article 17 reads in part:

The Brothers gladly associate lay persons with them in their educational mission. They provide, for those who so desire, the means to learn about the Founder and to live according to his spirit.⁵

This principle is specified in article 17c, which states: “The Brothers make known to the rest of the educational community the essential elements of the Lasallian tradition.”⁶

This relatively new policy challenges us to keep in balance three levels of meaning in the Lasallian vocabulary we are about to analyze: what the words meant to the Founder and the early Brothers; how they apply to the Lasallian educator today; how they can be shared with Lasallian educators who are not members of the Institute.

(1) *The first thing that a Lasallian educator is and does is to be a Brother and to act like one.* In the beginning the only Lasallian educators were Brothers who had been formally received into the Institute: all male, all celibate, all living in community, all bound by a common *Rule*, all wearing the same distinctive garb. The title Brother was chosen originally to distinguish the members of the young Society from the ordained clergy, on the one hand, and independent lay schoolteachers on the other.

But the idea of being a Brother need not be such an exclusivist or organizational concept. The reality is much deeper. Brotherhood implies sisterhood. It expresses a personal relationship on a

common level, as distinct from the vertical relationship we have with persons we call father or mother. Brother, and sister, are the words the New Testament uses to express the relationships among all the members of the Christian community. In the New Testament, only God is called Father and only Jesus Christ is a priest: in the New Testament churches none of the ministers were called priests, and no minister was addressed as Father.

In the modern world, the words brotherhood and sisterhood are being used more and more often to express the longing for community and solidarity: among nations and peoples worldwide, among persons united in a common cause, or within closely knit interpersonal communities. That is why we [De La Salle] Christian Brothers now more than ever want to share our tradition of brotherhood. We can apply a line here from a hymn often sung at communion time: “Our brotherhood embraces all, whose Father is the same.”⁷

In speaking to the Brothers of his time, De La Salle himself used the image of the older brother to describe the relationship between the Lasallian educator and the students. There is a bonding between an older and a younger brother that provides a special relationship and a special opportunity to teach and to learn that is not present in a youngster’s relation to father, or mother, or uncle, or aunt. The *Declaration* of 1967, already cited, puts it this way:

In the words of the Founder, the Brother is with the students from morning to evening. This means that Saint De La Salle conceived of education in terms of a fraternal relationship between the teacher and the student. The Brother is totally immersed in the life of the students: he shares their interests, their worries, and their hopes. He is not so much a schoolmaster instilling a set of teachings as he is an older brother who helps them to be aware of what the Spirit is speaking within themselves, what their own abilities are, and little by little how they may discover their true place in the world.⁸

The fact that Lasallian educators have traditionally been Brothers rather than “Fathers” helps to foster a significant characteristic of our schools. They are not clerical, although the dignity of the priesthood, and the dignity of biological fatherhood for that matter, are deeply respected. But teachers with previous experience in schools conducted by religious or diocesan priests will tell you that the atmosphere in a Brothers’ school is different. There is less pomposity and posturing, and more direct involvement in the concerns and the lifestyle of the students.

The non-clerical aspect of the Lasallian educator that is implied in the title Brother has special relevance in the Church today. The [De La Salle] Christian Brothers and their colleagues living in the secular world share a common status and vocation as lay persons. There are many signs that the age of exclusive clerical control and clerical privilege in the Church 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 has always been and continues to be an important concern of the Lasallian educator, precisely as Brother.

It may be that not every Lasallian educator would be happy to be given the title Brother. The term may strike some as male chauvinist, and in a way it is. Surely, not many of the increasing

number of women who are or who want to be Lasallian educators can be expected to be enthusiastic at the prospect of being called “Brother.” They might not want to be called “sister” either, for fear of being mistaken for a nun. The same might be true of Lasallian educators who are fathers – either in the clerical or biological sense – or mothers, as some are. The point here, in focusing on this fundamental word in the Lasallian vocabulary, is not what the Lasallian educator is called, but what such a person is or does as a result. The essential thing is that the Lasallian educator exemplifies all that being brother implies: personal relationship, freedom from paternalism and clericalism, on the one hand; solidarity in a human community of brothers and sisters, on the other.

(2) *A second element in De La Salle’s description of the Lasallian educator is his use of the word spirit.* In an early version of his *Rule* (1718), he wrote:

That which is of the utmost importance and to which the greatest attention should be given in a Community is that all who compose it possess the spirit peculiar to it ... for it is this spirit that ought to animate all their actions and be the motive of their whole conduct.⁹

De La Salle is very explicit as to what that spirit is: “The spirit of this Institute,” he writes in Chapter Two of the 1718 *Rule*, “is first, a spirit of faith ... The spirit of the Institute consists, secondly, in an ardent zeal for the instruction of children.”¹⁰ In the next chapter, he uses the word spirit again when he writes, “A true spirit of community will always be shown and maintained in this Institute.”¹¹ The spirit of the Lasallian educator, therefore, has three components: faith, zeal, and community. These are not three distinct spirits, but really only three aspects of the one spirit of faith, overflowing into zeal, and lived in a concrete way in an apostolic faith community.

The Lasallian educator motivated by a spirit of faith is 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 faith may have been and still are to many people. In sharing this spirit with our colleagues this does not mean, either, that we expect them to adopt the lifestyle of professed religious living in community. In using the word spirit in connection with faith, De La Salle intended something more profound than any merely external expression of religious faith.

Rather, in his writings on the spirit of faith, De La Salle urges the Brothers to develop a faith vision that would enable them to see beyond appearances. He wanted his Lasallian educators to be able to find God, that is, ultimate meaning and value, in the street urchins they faced every day in the classroom, in their colleagues, in their personal and professional failures as well as their success, in the reversals that beset the Lasallian movement as well as in its providential growth, in their material poverty as well as in the richness of their association together. In the Lasallian sense, then, the spirit of faith has to do with the perception of value, ultimate value.

The spirit of faith always gives the Lasallian educator an uncanny ability 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 be able 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 in those moments 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 likewise be nurtured by the kind of reading 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. That is why De La Salle describes the spirit of the Lasallian educator in terms of zeal as well as faith. Faith overflows into zeal; zeal is a manifestation of faith; the spirit of faith and the spirit of zeal are in reality two aspects of the same spirit.

De La Salle refers to this aspect of the spirit of the Lasallian educator as an ardent zeal. That is a zeal that burns, that sets us on fire. It isn't easy to experience that day after day in the classroom, as we all know. That is why De La Salle again uses the word spirit. It suggests something more than merely being zealous, that is, keeping busy all day, doing one's job, and 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, stay away from drugs, or bring their sexual urges under reasonable control.

Rather, the zeal of the Lasallian educator is an insistent and dynamic urge to want to share the best of oneself with the students: to communicate one's sense of ultimacy or, 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. In short, the spirit of zeal drives the Lasallian educator to make the students aware that their lives have meaning and value.

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 discover soon enough. Perhaps the best test of whether the zeal of the Lasallian educator is authentic, is whether or not the students are set on fire with the same zeal to share their values and vision with others, to make sacrifices for the cause of justice and peace, for example, or to find other ways to break out of their characteristic adolescent preoccupation with themselves.

A third element in the spirit of the Lasallian educator is the spirit of community. A community is the context in which one lives the spirit of faith and zeal. Strangely enough, De La Salle did not use the term community to refer to what we call community today. When he wants to speak of the local community of Brothers, he uses the word “house.” For him the community was the Institute, the spirit of community was the esprit de corps that held together the whole Society he had founded. This was especially important at a time when the very existence of the Institute was precarious, when those who wanted to take it over and turn it into something else continually threatened its distinctive character.

In some respects, the situation today is different. At the same time, never before since the time of its foundation has the Institute been so threatened by internal and external forces. That is all the more reason to preserve the spirit of community in the Founder's sense. That spirit is being translated today into the spirit of interdependence in a worldwide community with a common mission; a community of apostolic communities implanted in a variety of cultures, all sharing the same brotherhood and motivated by the same faith and zeal; a community composed of Brothers, professional colleagues, parents, students, and alumni that together constitute what we are beginning to call the Lasallian Family. Everyone here is part of that Lasallian Family and shares in the challenge to exemplify what De La Salle meant when he insisted "a true spirit of community will always be shown and maintained in this Institute."¹²

(3) *The third expression in the Lasallian vocabulary that I would like to devote some attention to is the teacher as minister.* John Baptist de La Salle pushes his language to the outer edges of orthodoxy when he tells the Brothers in his *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*: "You are ambassadors and ministers of Jesus Christ"¹³; and even more boldly, "The Church, whose ministers you are, commissions you"¹⁴; 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 your work of sharing in the ministry ... of the principal bishops and pastors of the Church."¹⁵ De La Salle was enough of a theologian not to identify the teaching ministry of the Brother with that of the bishop, but he comes awfully close.

Without doubt, one of the major achievements of De La Salle was to elevate the teaching function to the status of a vocation, worthy of the dedication of a lifetime. We have to remember that in the seventeenth century, schoolteachers, as distinct from university professors, were recruited from the scum of society. Most of them were dropouts from universities or seminaries, rough characters generally, barely literate and not much better disciplined than their students.

De La Salle himself tells us that when he first became involved with the schoolteachers, he thought of them as lower in status than his own valet. He changed all that by transforming the function of teaching school into a vocation and a ministry. That is one of the major reasons that De La Salle did not want the Brothers to be priests. He considered the priesthood irrelevant and unnecessary, an element that would distract them from the obligations and dignity of their vocation to be teachers.

De La Salle knew full well that the dignity of the teaching vocation could not be established simply by affirming it, even in the lofty biblical language of ministry and apostolic succession. He saw to it that the Brothers were trained for their teaching ministry. Much of it in those days was on the job training, but it was a corporate effort, and the instantaneous success of the Christian Schools is proof that it was effective. When special opportunities arose for the Brothers to expand their teaching beyond the elementary level, De La Salle provided the necessary advanced training. On three separate occasions he opened training centers for teachers who were not Brothers, thus extending the principle that all schoolteachers ought to be and could be properly trained.

When he tells the Brothers that they are ministers of Jesus Christ and ministers of the Church, De La Salle refers most obviously to the teaching of religion. In his day, and up until recently, every

Brother, and only Brothers, taught religion. Now it is more customary to hand this part of the curriculum over to specialists, whether they are Brothers or not. Important as religious instruction was and still is, it does not mean that teaching a religion is the only way, or even the best way, to be a minister of the Gospel. De La Salle never made a sharp distinction between teaching religion and teaching the other school subjects, any more than he did between the religious life of the Brother and his professional life as a teacher.

For De La Salle, the entire teaching activity of the Lasallian educator is a ministry, a service in the name of the Gospel for those he described as “far from salvation.”¹⁶ De La Salle knew that salvation in terms of human dignity in this world was as problematic for the students as their salvation in the next world; 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 engaged as much in the struggle against human ignorance and poverty as against unbelief and sin.

Just about the best expression of this Lasallian tradition, that teaching secular subjects constitutes an authentic ministry or “apostolate,” can be found in the *Declaration* of 1967:

It is true to say that a Brother exercises a ministry whenever he truly educates. It is apostolic to awaken in students a serious attitude toward life and the conviction of the greatness of the destiny of each 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 trust-worthiness, brotherhood, and justice.¹⁷

That, it seems to me, is one way of saying what a Lasallian educator does – such a person exercises a ministry.

Endnotes

1. This address was delivered as part of a workshop at Saint Mary’s College of California (approximately 1998).

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. The reference here is to Brother Gary York (1945-1994), who was a professor at Saint Mary’s College of California, and Gery Short, who was from 1984 to 1995 the director of

formation for mission and from 1995 until 2016 the director of the office of education of the District of San Francisco (later the District of San Francisco New Orleans) of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

4. *The Brothers of the Christian Schools in the World Today: A Declaration* (Rome, 1967), #6.1 and #7.1.

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

6. *The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (Rome, 1987), #17c.

7. The hymn being referenced is that of “Where Charity and Love Prevail,” which was translated by Omer Westendorf (1961).

8. *The Brothers of the Christian Schools in the World Today: A Declaration* (Rome, 1967), #6.1 and #40.4.

9. “Rule of 1718” in *Rule and Foundational Documents of John Baptist de La Salle* and translated and edited by Augustine Loes and Ronald Isetti (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 2002), page 16.

10. “Rule of 1718” in *Rule and Foundational Documents of John Baptist de La Salle* (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 2002), pages 16 & 17. The same wording is also found on the same page in “Rule of 1705.”

11. “Rule of 1718” in *Rule and Foundational Documents of John Baptist de La Salle* (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 2002), page 20. The same wording is also found on the same pages in “Rule of 1705.”

12. “Rule of 1718” in *Rule and Foundational Documents of John Baptist de La Salle* (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 2002), page 20. The same wording is also found on the same pages in “Rule of 1705.”

13. *Meditation* #195.2

14. Cf. *Meditation* #199.1: “How much, then, you must consider yourselves honored by the Church, to have been assigned by her to such a holy and exalted work, to be chosen by her to procure for children the knowledge of our religion and the Christian spirit.”

15. *Meditation* #200.1 and *Meditation* #199.3

16. Cf. *Meditation* #193.3: “God wills not only that all come to the knowledge of the truth, but also that all be saved. He cannot truly desire this without providing the means for it and, therefore, without giving the children the teachers who will assist them in the fulfillment of his plan ... You are the ones whom he has chosen to help in the work of announcing to children [“a

great number of whom would otherwise be abandoned” #193.2] the Gospel of his Son and the truths that are contained in it.”

17. *The Brothers of the Christian Schools in the World Today: A Declaration* (Rome, 1967), #6.1 and #41.2.