

Preface to the Doctoral Dissertation of Brother Miguel Campos, FSC

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Translated by Leonard Marsh, FSC, PhD²

Cahiers Lasalliens has published in two volumes³ the doctoral dissertation in theology defended by Miguel Campos at the Pontifical Lateran University in October 1973. The jury noted that, like several of his fellow students at the Jesus Magister Institute, this candidate had produced an extraordinary scholarly work.⁴ Unanimously, they awarded him the highest level of distinction.

This dissertation, although an academic work, is nevertheless first and foremost the result of an encounter.

The text was written in French by a Cuban whose initial university education was taken in the United States. We owe this theological and scientific research to a religious, a Brother of the Christian Schools, who before his novitiate had majored in chemistry and then taught in Santo Domingo, Miami, and the Catechetical Institute of Manizales (ICLA). These apostolic activities brought him into profound contact with the aspirations of Latino and North American youth. His commitment as a religious educator led him to contribute effectively to a radical transformation of the structures in the school where he was teaching.

More than one reader will doubtlessly be surprised to learn that this book, on a saint who lived in seventeenth-century France, was composed by a young man who experienced in his heart the trends and tensions of the modern world. Yet through it all and amidst years dedicated to hard and even drudging work, he never wavered from his vibrant interest in song, music, literature, and contemporary film. Indeed, with him work and pleasure are not mutually exclusive.

The questions, which preoccupied the author as he approached his dissertation, rose up out of a confrontation between his faith and his experience of today's world. The concerns that stimulated his research were the results of the many efforts and risks he had taken to truly announce to the youth of these times the authentic message of the Gospel. He had put to the test the fundamental and radical theological question that is raised more importantly today than ever: "What is the role of Revelation with respect to the real life we know and experience, and the role of faith with respect to reason, religion with respect to culture, and in a word, God with respect to the world?"⁵

Campos was moved to raise this existential question to a human being he encountered in a real sense, John Baptist de La Salle. By doing this he discovered and showed that within the real world itself De La Salle also, in his own historical context and personal life, encountered and lived for God through the ecclesial service of his Brothers. Thus the Lasallian itinerary of announcing the Gospel was part and parcel of God's incarnation among men.

Moved by the Lord as he discovered the concrete needs of poor children, De La Salle allied himself with schoolmasters who were poorly provided for and whose social condition and insecurity he himself embraced. Because this communal alliance was animated by the Spirit, the Founder and the members of the Community of the Brothers of the Christian Schools helped each other to gradually find and discover God in their daily living as God's work was accomplished in and by them. In letting himself be moved in this way day in and day out by the demands of serving God, De La Salle was led to participate freely in the Paschal Mystery. From his self-annihilation until his death and from his lived experience of abandonment to God sprang a liberating life for him, for his Brothers, and for poor children.

Thus, De La Salle stayed focused all his life on the evangelical purpose of the Society that he nurtured and which nurtured him toward God. Despite the apparent endless drudgery of their existence, he devoted himself to having his Brothers discover and live the uplifting experience of being taken hold of by the living God and collaborating with him in his work of salvation in the Church. He brought his Brothers to see, in their modest work as teachers, God's liberating love made real for young people whose social condition seemed to relegate them irremediably to a dead-end life in this world and to no hope in the next.

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The present reflection on evangelization during the origins of the Institute results then from a dialogue between two living beings brought together mysteriously by an interior relationship that transcends the spatial, chronological, and cultural distances that separate them. Yet this dissertation also makes a valuable contribution to the even now current theological issue of the evangelical foundation of the religious life. Indeed it was precisely to form his disciples in the evangelical spirit that John Baptist de La Salle consecrated his entire life and all his activities.

He did this especially by writing for them numerous spiritual and pedagogical works, among them the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* (MTR)⁶, which have a crucial role despite their being unknown for a long time. This treatise is literally put together from quotations from the New Testament, especially from Saint Paul, but also from the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. Is it not then logical to find in the MTR the basic evangelical principles of the Brother's life? In fact, the author of this dissertation has endeavored to examine closely the MTR, taking into account their richness on several levels, appreciating their dynamic unity, and bringing these out better than any of his predecessors.

The original impetus that inspired the author kept him from being tempted to define the evangelizing mission of the Brother from a writing of the Founder. He instinctively knew that one could understand an enduring idea only by putting it into the context of the lived experience of its author. The durability of a message can be appreciated only if one takes into account the unique situation in which it was articulated and transmitted. And to demonstrate the relevance of what a message teaches one must bring together real persons who, by their fundamental questions and their lived responses to them, brought about, developed, and defined that message. On an even deeper level, Miguel Campos understood that rather than in a written work – even the Scriptures – each Brother must look for the foundation of his life in how he lives the Gospel

here and now, always referring to how the Good News operated in De La Salle's life and in the beginnings of his first community.

The true meaning of the MTR can be had only by seeing them as the thematic expression of a life's experience, an incarnational itinerary, and a sense of community geared toward service. Indeed the biblical quotations throughout the work are relevant and full of meaning only because De La Salle, by constantly referring to Scripture, was reading his own personal history as the history of salvation and was calling the Brothers to recognize in the occurrences of their own lives the actual playing out of God's salvific work in them.

This is why the first and second parts of this dissertation are inseparable.

This study of De La Salle's evangelical itinerary implements an original methodology that has as its inspiration the same principles as the study itself. Or at least the study applies to Lasallian history the best resources of modern hermeneutics.

The accounts of De La Salle's first biographers remain the prime source of any new attempt to understand the mystery of his life. As one goes back to examine these accounts, it is necessary to remember that hagiographers can report events in texts that are marked with and sometimes distorted by their own mental categories and intended purposes, whether admittedly or implicitly. To return with more certainty to the events themselves as they really took place, it was necessary to come to terms with the different interpretations given by Bernard, Maillefer, and Blain.

It was also necessary to attempt to discover the personal interpretation that De La Salle himself gave to his own itinerary. As he was a man of the classical seventeenth century, he was hardly given to personal confidences. A man of action, he did not have the leisure to linger and write his autobiography. Reading his apparently practical writings is also like getting a glimpse of the most intimate of religious experiences that he so often relates. Miguel Campos can take the credit for being one of the first to sense this.

Campos also shows us the fertile terrain of such diverse texts as the *Memorandum on the Beginnings*, the *Memorandum on the Habit*, the *Rules I Have Imposed upon Myself*, the Vow Formula, numerous occasional or directive letters, certain passages of the *Rule*, and even a gently insistent missive addressed by the Brothers to the Founder in 1714. Better than an intimate diary, these texts provide us with a key to how De La Salle himself understood the meaning and evangelical nature of the events of his daily life. These writings show us how he gradually perceived God's design for him taking place as his own life unfolded.

Campos explains this method logically and thoroughly in the Introduction to the first part. He clearly defines an original vocabulary which he himself created and which the entire dissertation uses as it clarifies it. The four key events he keeps as his guidelines cover well the whole Lasallian itinerary. The power-words he uses without any rigid system to describe the key events, translate well what is stable in his itinerary and at the same time they mark out the progression of a unique action-word. The study of the MTR can consequently be seen as an in-

depth study of the major power-word of the Founder, the one which synthesizes his peak experience, i.e., the totality of his existence grasped all at once, the one which best captures the formation of his disciples' lives for the evangelical mission.

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Miguel Campos challenges the opposition between objectivity and subjectivity. He prefers to speak of presence and communion. Committing himself entirely to his work, he has had to conduct serious research to encounter the person of De La Salle. His rigorous and demanding method is more apparent in the second part. He has deliberately avoided any temptation to draw hasty conclusions, which would have imposed a foreign and arbitrary mindset on De La Salle. In order to do so, the author committed himself to following step-by-step the very procedure adopted in the MTR. He stuck to a meticulous analysis of each of the biblical citations, which form the outline of the text. Such a labor of objectivity could not be accomplished without a certain painstaking and tiresome effort and for this the author deserves much credit.

Any reader, who takes part in the discipline of this process and agrees to walk with the author through desert territory, will find on numerous pages some refreshing oases that quench the thirst and quicken the step. These oases appear precisely because of the author's own docility toward and love for the Lasallian sources. At the end of a tedious voyage with the author, the reader as companion on the road will be astounded to have rediscovered in the mind of the Founder an ever fertile and lush landscape.

The same rigorous methodology also characterizes the first part of the dissertation, although perhaps less evidently. In order to cover De La Salle's evangelical itinerary, the author has taken as his guides De La Salle's first biographers. He has put himself among them, shedding light on them, and letting them each explain and complement the others. His procedure in this has been facilitated by landmark research recently done by patient and unsung scholars.

In the scheme of the *Cahiers Lasalliens* this dissertation immediately follows, takes up, and furthers the exhaustive work done by Léon de Marie Aroz.⁷ The investigative research of this scholar will give us a better idea of De La Salle's true human character, which has been so long obscured by the conventional opaque halo provided in Blain's unwieldy text.⁸ At the same time, this face of the Founder will radiate a holiness more vivid and attractive for us, because it is more interior and more personal to John Baptist de La Salle.

Even though this dissertation is presented in a highly organized fashion, it nevertheless bears no resemblance to a stuffy academic dissertation. Instead, it makes one think of a musical composition whose themes intertwine, repeat, and develop in several variations. This symphony touches the listener at a level more profound than any verbal language could.

The multiple divisions and subdivisions will not put the reader off track because this research was brought about by a rich intuition and the simplicity of brand new ideas. The author of this dissertation has understood that the appearance of multiple changes in religious life during the

course of the Church's history is not the result of a deductive process. The Gospel comes out of a concrete situation; man's response to the Gospel gets expressed in different forms because these forms, all different in their global origin, result from the unique social context in which the Spirit stirs up this response.

Is this not the basis of the charismatic nature of religious life? Is this not the way that the Gospel, ever present and always new and young, is made tangible to men? And is it not the same with the Good News of salvation as it is manifested in the lives of real people liberated in Jesus Christ? And so it is when a man responds to God's salvific plan by welcoming it into his soul as God bursts in and transforms his heart. Likewise with God's salvific plan carried out by the Spirit in the fraternal communion that spreads itself to the Church and the whole world.

It seems to me that in this way this dissertation brings an original and rich contribution to the question of the evangelical foundation of the religious life. It demonstrates that the problem must be approached by breaking with the rigid paradigm of the "three evangelical counsels." It shows that the religious life does not exist in and of itself and that its evangelical foundation can neither be defined nor even studied in general terms as if from the outside.

The solid foundation of this study and the breadth of its scope can perhaps be appreciated only by an attentive reading. The richness of its overtones is nonetheless real. Within its specific objectives, this research develops and in fact expands on long standing theological themes that our historical and cultural context present to us for a fresh reexamination. God speaks here and now. The Church, the people of God living in the world today, lives in the present both looking back in history and looking forward in hope. Christian moral life springs daily from the dwells in man and gives him energy. It is a requirement for growth in the Spirit, for communion with all beings, and for the cause of liberating men on earth who wait for a new world already active within the present world.

This dissertation offers an original approach to the De La Salle event and shows us its pertinence today. By its methodology and its findings, it brings a rich contribution to the study of the evangelical foundation of the religious life. It shows that one can and must treat such a subject by enlarging its scope to include all that *Lumen Gentium*, *Gaudium et Spes*, and *Dei Verbum* have brought to the question.⁹ The theology of the religious life, having become almost fashionable to study, has everything to lose if it limits itself to its narrow and strict area, which can rapidly become a ghetto. It has everything to gain if it opens itself to the life-giving breath of a renewed theology of Revelation, of the Church, of the world, and of the action of God. Miguel Campos does not write abstractly about this, but rather his dissertation gives real evidence to explain it. This is of no small account.

This work comes from and refers back to the author's own life. In this way it mirrors the author who returned to his youth in America and to his Brothers in Miami whom he had not really left while he was away on studies. What his work shows us is that we must especially look for God within our world; it shows that the Gospel makes its appearance today, for us, in the context of

our life, in that fragile knot of human relations where we have to live and manifest the gratuitous love that has touched us so that we can give witness to it.

This dissertation also shows us that we can live our human history as the history of salvation only if we constantly base it on Scripture, in solitude, in untiring contemplative prayer, and in the celebration of the liturgy. We will be able to give our all to today's demanding commitments only if we live them by balancing memory against hope, if we consent to let ourselves be guided by the Spirit in our innermost selves and in the Church toward Jesus Christ whose definitive coming we actively await and whose Spirit ceaselessly calls us to move forward.

There is no other evangelical foundation for an existence that we want to be entirely religious.

The word hope comes to mind immediately as I write. I beg your indulgence for the homage that I pay in this Preface to the hope that Miguel Campos' dissertation rekindles.

Religious life is in crisis. It is trite to state that, but the heart-rending suffering that this crisis provokes in living men and women is far from academic.

To hope is difficult. What is easy is to go down the slope of despair, and that is the temptation. The temptation to despair takes on multiple forms which we find in and around ourselves: the temptation to break away vociferously or to drift away silently; the temptation toward indifference, be it shameful or haughty; the temptation to retreat quietly into some self-absorbed project; the temptation to get irritated and exhausted in confrontations, to give in to panic and anxiety by cutting the cord, to seek security in obstinate rigidity, the nostalgic idealization of the past, blindness to reality and waiting in fantasy for a miraculous recovery of the past.

The crisis is there; it affects us. No need to fabricate it! This dissertation has personally helped me to rekindle the small hope necessary each morning to welcome it with tenderness and patient humor for oneself.

In the encounter of the author with De La Salle, I have felt the striking relevance of the Lasallian inspiration and message. The Spirit acts today through De La Salle, and I have witnessed the force of its seductive and irresistible movement. As I accompanied a Brother in this encounter, I have myself been touched, in my outlook and in my commitment, by this power that rises from an Other in our innermost being.

The crisis is there; it affects us. The work published here shows the place held by crises in De La Salle's own itinerary. It shows that each time each crisis was for him not the occasion for spiritual deepening but rather its source.

De La Salle recognized the Spirit of God constantly calling him in repeated trials. By a realistic and courageous acceptance of these crises he found in them the incessant refinement of his evangelical conscience and the continual renewal of his ecclesial commitment in the service of the Gospel.

The bad days rain down; unhurriedly; tirelessly; hour after hour, day after day.
 The bad days rain down.
 And with all the water that slips tirelessly from the sky, (from the sky that they could call bad.)
 With all this water that falls to earth, with all this slanting rain,
 (Others would make marshes and swamps full of fever and peopled with dirty disgusting creatures.)
 But they, the good soil, my light well-tilled soil,
 Well prepared.
 My good soil of souls, well tilled by my Son for centuries and centuries,
 They ... collect all the rain that falls,
 And, for a wonder, they do not make of it marshes and mud and slime.
 And algae and hart's-tongue and queer plants.
 But, for a wonder, it is this very water that they collect and that does not trouble them.
 Because, for a wonder, it is from this very water that they produce the fountain.
 It is this water, the same water that flows through the meadows.
 It is the same pure water that climbs up the stalks of wheat for the Bread.
 It is the same pure water that climbs up the vine-shoots for the Wine....
 It is the same collected water that gushes forth, that springs forth.
 In the new fountain, in the young spring.
 In the springing and re-springing of hope.¹⁰

The crisis is there; it affects us. But when its evangelical source is captured, in storms and in the daily rainy periods of life, it springs up into new fountains through the hope born of De La Salle.

Endnotes

1. Brother Michel Sauvage, FSC (1923-2001) did his doctoral thesis in Lille (*Catéchèse et Laïcité*, 1963), was a professor at the Lateran Pontifical University in Rome (Jesus Magister Institute), and was theologian for his brother (Bishop Jean Sauvage) at the Second Vatican Council. From 1966 to 1976, he was Assistant Superior General for Formation of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. In addition, he served as the second director of the office of Lasallian Studies in the Generalate in Rome.

2. Brother Leonard Marsh, FSC, is associate professor of Foreign Languages at La Salle University in Philadelphia, PA. He earned his PhD in French Literature from Boston College, and he specializes in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century French literature.

3. This Preface appears in the publication of the dissertation by Brother Miguel-Adolfo Campos Marino entitled *L'itinéraire évangélique de saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle et le recours à l'Écriture dans ses "Méditations pour le Temps de la Retraite."* *Contribution à l'étude sur les fondements évangéliques de la vie religieuse, I & II* [*Cahiers Lasalliens #45 & #46*] (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1974). The Preface is dated as having been done in Rome on January 26, 1974, Feast of the Transfer to Rome of the Relics of Saint John Baptist de La Salle.

4. In *De La Salle: A Founder as Pilgrim* by Edwin Bannon (London: De La Salle Provincialate, 1988), one can find a “reading of the life of the Brothers of the Christian Schools in light of *L’Itinéraire évangélique de saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle*, the first volume of the doctoral thesis of Miguel Adolfo Campos-Marino, FSC.” Bannon, who had served as the archivist of the Institute in Rome, attempts “to convey to an English-speaking readership something of the wealth of research and insight that make up this part [volume one] of the thesis.”

5. Heinz, Zahrnt. *Aux Prises avec Dieu* (Cerf, 1989), page 399.

6. “Meditations for the Time of Retreat” in *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*, translated by Richard Arandez and Augustine Loes (Lasallian Publications, 1994), #193 to #208.

7. Luis Aroz Pascual (1912-2007) was one of the truly great Lasallian scholars and archival researchers of seventeenth-century France. His religious name was Brother Léon de Marie. Some of his many publications appear in the *Cahiers Lasalliens* series (#26 to #42 from 1966 to 1982 & #51 to #54 from 1989 to 1998).

8. Jean-Baptiste Blain. *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle*, translated by Richard Arandez and edited by Luke Salm (Lasallian Publications, 2000). Blain’s French-language biography of De La Salle was originally published in 1733.

9. These three documents are Constitutions of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).

10. Charles Peguy. *The Portico of the Mystery of the Second Virtue*, translated by Dorothy Brown Aspinwall (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1970).