

Where Are You Stuck? John Baptist de La Salle's Thought and Modern Clinical Psychology¹

Michael E. Carey, Psy.D., *Manhattan College, Riverdale, New York, USA*

Exasperated, I entered my weekly clinical supervision meeting looking for answers as to what was happening with my client. I had a 17 year-old male, high school student who had been referred to therapy for depression as a result of being bullied at school. Although he attended a well-funded public high school, Caleb lived below the poverty line with his mother, aunt, and cousin. All his belongings fit in one suitcase; and he literally used that suitcase as a dresser in the room he shared with his 21 year-old, male cousin. We had completed our seventh meeting and I was struggling to understand Caleb's goal for therapy. He never mentioned bullying or feeling depressed. In fact, he simply did not speak much at all in our meetings. The dynamic established was that I was doing much of the work through continual questioning and probing, which inevitably ended with one word answers. While I had my theoretical hypotheses regarding his depression and his psychosocial history, Caleb was not prepared to hear any interpretation I may have formulated.

As I discussed the case with my supervisor, Dr. Allen, I presented a few of my theories, particularly as they related to Caleb's impoverished upbringing. However, my main concern was my frustration at the lack of verbal interaction with Caleb. Psychodynamic psychotherapy generally requires verbal interaction between therapist and client, with an eye toward insight for the client. Deep down I was hoping that I might be able to refer Caleb to another therapist. I had no such luck. With my frustration apparent to my supervisor, he calmly asked me, "Where are you stuck?" I went on for another four or five minutes discussing how Caleb's lack of verbal interaction was problematic and how I was not sure if I was the appropriate therapist or even whether insight therapy was the best model for him. My supervisor again asked, "Where are you stuck?" Feeling frustrated with Dr. Allen, I again focused on Caleb's dynamics and how slow moving the therapy seemed to me, although Caleb was always prompt and never missed an appointment. These were also after-school meetings on Caleb's time. However, it just seemed the therapy had come to a halt.

Dr. Allen listened patiently and then sharpened his question asking, "I know where Caleb is stuck. I want to know, 'where are you stuck?'" The simple but direct question finally penetrated. With no answer, I stalled by repeating the question aloud, "Where am I stuck?" Dr. Allen simply nodded and kept the focus of the question on me. I was flailing, as I now had to look at myself. The firm ground of intellectualizing Caleb's dynamics had been pulled out from under me. Finally, I had to admit I was clueless in working with a silent client. This admission changed everything. From that point on, our supervision took off in a new direction. I was forced to examine my own psychology, including, but not limited to, my expectations of clients, my expectations of the therapy process, my own biases, and countertransference² feelings toward varied clients. The tortuous and, sometimes very torturous, process of the need for self-insight began in earnest during this supervision session. It was the beginning of great change in my work

with Caleb, my overall approach as a therapist and, ultimately, in my work as a clinical supervisor.

This simplest, yet most direct, question “Where are you stuck?” has become the lead question in any individual or group supervision session I conduct. It remains the primary question I ask myself when dealing with difficult clinical issues. The power of the question lies in where the question is directed. The natural tendency of most therapists is to direct their attention toward the client. While that is relevant, the therapeutic relationship often stalls once this critical question is outwardly directed. Although counterintuitive, the primary challenge for any clinician is to be conscious of one’s own experience in the process of helping the client become conscious of his or her own experience. The therapist’s level of consciousness is the key to unlocking the well-defended client and the stagnant therapeutic relationship. In simple terms, the therapist needs to know why they say what they say and why they do what they do when they do it.

I mention this supervision story as it has re-emerged many times during my self-study of the work of John Baptist de La Salle.³ On the surface, it would seem that the work of the patron saint of all teachers, a man of the turn of 18th-century France, and modern, secular psychological thought would have little in common. In fact, there is some thinking that suggests that religious thought and modern psychotherapy may be diametrically opposed. Alan Watts⁴ articulates such a notion by contrasting the respective goals of psychotherapy and institutionalized religion. He sees psychotherapy as encouraging people to leave the fold, while religious traditions persuade people to return to the fold. While there may be truth in that statement from an institutional point of view, there is also great synergy between the great religious traditions and psychotherapy. Authentic psychotherapy is inherently a spiritual practice. In fact, an authentic psychotherapy experience is a form of nonviolent social change; a system whose roots are firmly grounded in the great religious traditions of the world.⁵

There is actually great congruence within the work of John Baptist de La Salle and later Lasallian scholars and the modern world of clinical psychology. One of the great strengths of the Lasallian worldview is the psychological truth contained within that ethos. The highly underrated and often overlooked work of John Baptist de La Salle entitled *The Conduct of the Christian Schools* provides a solid starting point to explore these ideas. The culling of some of the psychological underpinnings of this work in conjunction with his work on civility and decorum has important implications for any Lasallian institution of higher education in the 21st century. For the purposes of this exploratory essay, I will focus on three specific areas of congruence between modern psychotherapy and Lasallian thought: namely, countertransference, structure and boundaries, and the concept of process.

Countertransference

Any psychologically minded individual reading *The Conduct of the Christian Schools* can see the pains to which De La Salle went in describing student behavior and motivation with prescribed teacher response to specific behaviors. This, in and of itself, shows great observational skill and psychological insight, something akin to our modern day Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, which is used in every therapist’s office.

However, the psychological genius of De La Salle is subtler than his behavioral observations, where he essentially has an outward focus on the students. The great psychological force of his system occurs when the Founder points the direction inward. As in clinical supervision, De La Salle forces teachers to look at their own psychological processes, not simply the students' psychological substance. He has an intuitive understanding of the power of a teacher over a student and displays great concern in addressing the requirements *on the part of the teacher* for correction of students. "Power problems and their mastery are similar in all the ministering professions."⁶ De La Salle also specifies clearly the traits the teacher must possess in order to undertake this important work.⁷

The answer to the difficulty of power imbalances and their potential for exploitation is the work of consciousness raising and understanding countertransference in the psychological world. Countertransference refers to "the idiosyncratic reactions that reflect more specifically on what you, personally, carry into your relationships or interactions."⁸ In *The Road Less Traveled*, M. Scott Peck describes transference as "the way of perceiving and responding to the world which is developed in childhood . . . but which is inappropriately transferred into the adult environment."⁹ In the role of teacher or therapist, these outdated perceptions become part of one's counter-transferential reactions to students or clients.

De La Salle's outline of the requirements for new teachers is a method that addresses and manages the teacher's own specific idiosyncratic traits. Left unexamined, these traits can often be harmful to students. This is directly antithetical to both the Lasallian model and the psychotherapeutic model whereby the explicit goals are to "do good" and provide healing. The goal of correction is reminiscent of the medical Hippocratic Oath when De La Salle writes, "No correction that could be harmful to the one who is to receive it must ever be administered. This would be to act directly contrary to the purpose of correction, which has been instituted only to do good."¹⁰ Some of the traits to overcome in the Lasallian model are impatience, partiality, agitation, discouragement, sentimentality, and particular friendships. While on the other hand, some of the traits to be acquired include professionalism, prudence, reserve, zeal, and vigilance.¹¹ The process of obtaining these traits is the great power of De La Salle's work. It is also an area where the clinical practice of examining countertransference and Lasallian thought can converge. The process-oriented psychodynamic psychological method can help move one, through intense self-examination, toward acquisition of these traits.

In Brother Agathon's work, *The Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher*,¹² the issue of countertransference is further addressed, although again not in psychological language. Specifically, Brother Agathon explicates the requirements for correction of students. There are ten mandates for correction with seven of these conditions addressing the tone of the teacher imparting the correction. In essence, these requirements are a valid attempt at managing countertransference. A few of these traits that focus on the teachers' personal worldviews are purity, charity, justice and moderation.¹³ Another requirement addressed is that correction must be *proper*. "We need to pay special attention to the age, the character, the temperament, and the dispositions of the students we are about to correct – and also to those of his parents – so that the punishment may be exactly proportionate to the fault, the circumstances, and the end we have in view."¹⁴

This requirement of being proper is a psychologically insightful approach on many levels. First, in conjunction with the other six mandates, the requirement to be proper addresses the notion of examining one's countertransference toward students. Second, it challenges the teacher to understand the family, the culture, and the student's entire psychosocial context. This is a staple, in the world of modern psychology, in what is referred to as case formulation. The Lasallian vision recognizes that one size does not fit all. The condition of being proper is a manifestation of the Lasallian ethos of respect for the dignity of each individual. Third, this conception of being proper resonates with the notion that the timing and tone of interventions need to be thoroughly examined prior to the intervention. This has very important implications in the overall approach to students in Lasallian higher education where we attempt to take a proactive rather than a reactive approach in all our dealings with students.

There are also, from the point of view of the Lasallian vision, three conditions required of students for correction. The students are expected to receive correction voluntarily, respectfully, and silently.¹⁵ In order for these three conditions to occur, the student must trust the teacher. That can only occur if the teacher is acting from a conscious, well thought out, virtuous vantage point. These three conditions are dependent upon the teacher doing the internal psychological work of the prior seven conditions. Again, the role of understanding and managing one's own attitudes and beliefs (i.e. countertransference) is absolutely necessary in creating the opportunity for successful intervention with the student.

As a collective unit, the template of the ten conditions for correction highlights another psychological truth witnessed by any psychotherapist or teacher. Again, the timing and tone of an intervention is more important for success than the technical correctness of an intervention. This insight is implied throughout these ten conditions for correction. John Baptist de La Salle and Brother Agathon intuitively understand this truth and address it deftly with the methodology of the twelve virtues at large and these ten conditions for correction.

Structure and Boundaries

As one reads *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*, it is clear that De La Salle had a very specific framework for the organization and daily operation of a school. He outlines in detail everything from how students and teachers should enter the building, to curriculum, to classroom layout, to the manner of reading and writing, to the prescribed manner of prayer, to very specific details on how to impose corrections on students, etc.¹⁶ His vision was detailed and clear. One of the great contributions of *The Conduct of the Christian Schools* is the structure within which the school day must take place. De La Salle was working with students unaccustomed to such discipline as they were often children of artisans, the poor, and often times were street "urchins." In addition, the crop of gentlemen looking to serve as teachers was also that of an undisciplined and untrained group at the time that De La Salle created a community within which to work with them.¹⁷ However, he understood clearly that structure, boundaries, and discipline were the absolute essential components to achieve any success.

The context of structured routine independent of content of coursework was an absolutely necessary ingredient for success in De La Salle's schools. So it is with psychotherapy. Psychotherapy clients, both from underserved backgrounds as well as from more elite

socioeconomic backgrounds, can present as undisciplined as any student from De La Salle's time. The emotional world of the psychotherapy session is often illogical and irrational, and this all the more requires specific boundary settings. This is another area of powerful psychological insight in the Lasallian vision. In simple terms, discipline and creating space for process are the most important elements of De La Salle's work and also any therapist's work. Without structure and discipline, it is nearly impossible to achieve any of the more central goals of learning or healing. The frame of the therapy setting, in which the therapist subordinates their need for self-expression and self-acknowledgment to the psychological needs of the client, is established with an eye toward the safety of the client.¹⁸

This subordination of needs is also a Lasallian notion. Brother Agathon describes the first component of the virtue of gentleness as "judging without harshness, without passion, without considering our own merit and our supposed superiority."¹⁹ Again, the accent is on the counter-transferential responsibilities of the teacher. The manifestation of the structure and boundaries is expressed in numerous ways. There are countless questions one must ask oneself as a therapist (and in De La Salle's model as a teacher) in entering the teaching or the therapeutic relationship. For example, how long are sessions? How does one get paid? What is the cancellation policy? How will one greet clients? How will one end sessions? This list of questions continues. These boundary issues were clearly on De La Salle's mind as he started the schools and started with simultaneous teaching, prescribed times for prayer, prescribed methods of writing, etc.²⁰ In essence, each system explicitly addresses the contract between student and teacher and between client and therapist.

The issue of structure and boundaries is vital. The context of routine and expectations of behavior and decorum allow for appropriate developmental processes to occur. The Lasallian school structure allowed for the variance in expectations among students at discrete developmental stages, both cognitively and emotionally. This is witnessed through De La Salle's detailed explication of specific responses to different situations that may arise (i.e., absences).²¹ In terms of daily expectations at the school, both students and teachers had very clear expectations. The ability to meet those expectations provides more than order, it allows for the appropriate space and context to internalize content. "He will be consistent in his dealings, this is all the more essential since . . . the children would never know precisely what to count on . . . and quite apt to make them lose interest in school or even to inspire them with aversion to it."²² In some cases, it also allows for the seeds of self-esteem to germinate, as it is an area where one can achieve by simply following the prescribed method. So it is in the world of psychotherapy. It is within this predictable, unique, safe space that healing can take place. Consistency allows for developmental insight for both the therapist and the client. Also, it is the rare break from routine that can often serve as a healing point. This can only occur, however, after the clear structure and boundaries are confirmed and practiced. A break in structure also only occurs if it is in the best interest of the client, just as correction only occurs in the best interest of the student.

Process

Perhaps the most powerful area of congruence between the Lasallian worldview and modern clinical psychology lies in their respective emphasis on process. When discussing process in the psychological world, it refers to the "the nature of the relationship between interacting

individuals.”²³ As discussed briefly, this relationship varies from the content of interactions between people. The process refers to the style and the nature of the discussion. For example, reading the transcript of a dialogue offers much less information than actually witnessing the dialogue itself. When we witness, we can gather tremendous information through tone, pitch, nonverbal cues, the style, and the timing of the interaction. These all provide insight into the impact of communication and the intent of the communication.²⁴

Returning to Brother Agathon’s work on the virtue of gentleness and its import to the notion of corrections, it is clear that the process – the style within which correction is imposed – is primary. “A teacher should be convinced that punishment itself does less to correct faults than the manner of imposing it.”²⁵ The manner of imposing correction requires discipline and self-subordination, in conjunction with the virtue of gentleness and the seven aforementioned conditions for correction on the part of the teacher. It is process, aided by solid structure and boundaries, which serves as a potential change agent both in therapy and in the classroom. In the case of correction, behavioral and sometimes attitudinal change is absolutely the goal. The importance of the process in facilitating change cannot be understated. In the world of psychotherapy, it is rarely the profound verbal and insightful interpretations that serve as a change agent. It is rather the caring presence of the therapist that serves to bring about curative results.²⁶ “The actual moment to moment experience of the client and therapist in the therapy relationship is the engine of change.”²⁷

While I have focused on Brother Agathon’s work specifically as it relates to the virtue of gentleness and the corrections, the explication of the other virtues is rife with commitment to process and consciousness of teachers in their commitment to the Lasallian process. For example, when discussing the virtue of patience as it relates to the teacher’s mission Brother Agathon writes, “he never grows disheartened or weary from repeating the same things to them often and at length, but he always does so with goodness and affection.”²⁸

Certainly, there are differences between the Lasallian methodology and that of modern psychodynamic psychotherapy. For example, it would be heresy in a therapy office to discuss the salvation of the client’s soul unless it was a topic raised by the client. Even then, the therapist’s goal would not be to achieve salvation, but to come to an understanding of salvation and its implications for the client’s intrapsychic and emotional experience. So too, we would never consider corporal punishment as a viable possibility in the world of modern psychology. Differences aside, there are clear theoretical congruencies that underpin these seemingly disparate systems. The thought and application of the ideas of John Baptist de La Salle and the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools²⁹ need not be underestimated in its psychological power and nuance. One of the goals of the De La Salle Christian Brothers over the past three centuries has certainly been to enact internal change while providing formal education.

The focus on structure and boundaries, the stress on the discipline and consciousness of the teachers, and the commitment to process are three key factors in the successful implementation of the Lasallian methodology. They are, also, core areas for further exploration as the Lasallian mission continues to adapt to the culture within which it exists and remains both relevant and vibrant in 21st-century secondary and higher education.

Notes

1. It is important to thank my colleague Brother Timothy Murphy, FSC. This essay began as a discussion on the concept of shame more than three years ago, as we worked together as counselors in the Manhattan College Counseling Center. Brother Timothy has been invaluable in supporting my study of Lasallian thought and the potential for integration with psychological thought. His encouragement and generosity as a colleague, a friend, and a religious have been the primary motivator in helping me pursue these ideas. I must acknowledge Brother Gerard Rummery, FSC. Brother Gerard's encouragement and feedback since our meeting in October 2011 has been inspirational. From halfway across the world, Brother Gerard has been responsive, candid, and erudite in all his responses to my pleas for help with these ideas. Brother William Mann, FSC has also been gracious in his encouragement to explicate these ideas and to forward them to a larger forum for review and discussion. Thank you.

2. American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder*, 4th ed. revised (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

3. John Baptist de La Salle (1651-1719), a 17th-century French priest, founded the Brothers of the Christian Schools and, with his first Brother teachers, launched what is now known as the international Lasallian educational movement of schools and universities. For more information, see: Carl Koch, Jeffrey Calligan, Jeff Gros, Eds.; *John Baptist de La Salle* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 2004); and Luke Salm, *The Work Is Yours: The Life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle*, 2nd edition (Landover, MD: Christian Brothers Publications, 1996).

4. Alan Watts. *Psychotherapy East and West*. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1975.

5. Michael Carey. *Psychoanalytic Self Psychology and the Ethic of Nonviolence*, doctoral dissertation. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertation Services, 1998.

6. Adolf Guggenbuhl-Craig. *Power in the Helping Professions*. Dallas, TX: Spring Publications, Inc., 1971.

7. Brother Gerard Rummery comments: "It is significant, not only that the chapter on correction becomes the longest in the book, but that it begins by setting out the six ways in which a teacher's behavior becomes unbearable to the students. This is an astonishingly honest evaluation; and some of the comments are far ahead of their time, e.g. 'Children do not have enough strength of body or of mind to bear the many difficulties with which life presents them.' This is not an appeal to theory but to observation of real children!" This is reminiscent of the development of self psychological theory by Heinz Kohut, who developed his theories after years of clinical observation of actual clients. See Heinz Kohut and Ernest Wolf, (1986). "Disorders of the Self and Their Treatment: An Outline," in Andrew Morrison, Ed., *Essential Papers on Narcissism* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1986): 175-196.

8. Irvin Yalom. *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy*, 5th edition. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2005: 175.

9 M. Scott Peck. *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth* (New York, NY: Touchstone Books, 1978): 46.

10. John Baptist de La Salle. *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*, translated by F. de La Fontainerie and Richard Arnandez and edited by William Mann (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1996):142.

11. De La Salle, *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*.

12. Brother Agathon, as the Superior General of the Brothers of the Christian Schools during the French Revolution (1777-1795), was the fifth successor of John Baptist de La Salle.

13. Brother Agathon. *The Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher and Circular Letter of 10 April 1786 concerning the Public Contests and Competitions Carried Out at the End of the School Year in Different Houses of His Congregation*, edited by Gerard Rummery (Landover, MD: Christian Brothers Conference, 2000).

14. Brother Agathon. *The Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher*, p. 40. Brother Gerard adds editorial insight by writing, “There is an underlying congruence in the *Conduct*, stemming from the fact that it dealt with cities and large towns where many of the people were illiterate. The *Conduct* wants the teachers to be in easy contact with the parents to show them what they would otherwise not know. For example, De LaSalle insists that they must try to persuade parents to keep their children at school “because a child... who has learned to read and write is capable of doing anything.”

15. Brother Agathon. *The Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher*.

16. De La Salle. *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*.

17. Luke Salm. *The Work Is Yours: The Life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle* (2nd ed.).

18. Nancy Mc Williams. *Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy: A Practitioner’s Guide* (New York, NY: The Guilford Press, 2004).

19. Brother Agathon. *The Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher*.

20 De La Salle. *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*.

21 Ibid.

22. Brother Agathon. *The Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher*, p. 24.

23. Yalom. *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy*.

24. Yalom. *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy*.

25. Brother Agathon. *The Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher*, p. 26.

26. Mc Williams. *Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy*.

27. Yalom. *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy*, p. 52.

28. Brother Agathon. *The Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher*.

29. The religious congregation of the Roman Catholic Church founded in the late 17th century by John Baptist de La Salle.