

## **Lasallian Pedagogy: A Fire in the Soul**

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### **1. Introductory Story about a Poor Child**

It should be no great surprise to those of you who know me well that I want to begin my remarks today by telling you a story. It is a story that I heard a few years ago about a youngster, a fairly religious young boy who might even be called a little pious, who was forced by difficult family circumstances beyond their control to wear tattered, hand-me-down clothes, who didn't have the newest or best gadgets, the condition of whose house was a bit embarrassing.

Some of the other youngsters, his not-too-kind companions, were one day mocking him for his poverty. They were taunting him, saying that even though he was so obviously religious God, from the looks of things, had obviously forgotten him and forgotten about his family.

The youngster stood there silently taking the hurt in; and after a few moments, with tears rolling down his cheeks, he looked at those taunting him and said, "I don't believe that God forgot me. I think that he probably asked somebody else to help me and to help my family, and they forgot. They just haven't gotten around to it yet."<sup>1</sup>

Now I share that story because, for me, it cuts to the heart of why Saint John Baptist de La Salle founded the Brothers of the Christian Schools and why Lasallian schools and universities, like those here in the Philippines, continue to exist all around the world. We were founded upon the conviction that no youngster and no family no matter how economically, affectively, intellectually, or spiritually in need should ever think that they have been forgotten or should ever have to wonder whether or not they've been passed over by God or by the rest of us.

**"A wish, a thought, a dream  
one unfading star in the darkness of the night"**

(from "Finale" in *A Fire in the Soul: A Cantata*)<sup>2</sup>

This story is a reminder to me that Lasallian schools and universities are fundamentally about the unfading dream of education for the least, the last, and the lost; but, it is, also, a reminder that our Lasallian commitment to the education and formation of our students (young and old alike), the dialogue that we promote and that we foster between faith and culture, the commitment we have and the attempts we make to awaken, nurture, and empower learners to ethical lives of service and leadership, and our striving to educate clear thinking, faith filled, morally upright, compassionate, just, and socially responsible citizens is our way of guaranteeing that no member of society should ever have cause to fear "that God forgot them" or that, although God asked somebody else to help them or to help their family that "they forgot ... they just haven't gotten around to it yet."

## **2. One Hundred Years of Lasallian Education in the Philippines**

As I sat in the auditorium of De La Salle University a few months ago for a live performance of Von de Guzman & Vicente Garcia Groyon's "A Fire in the Soul: A Cantata,"<sup>3</sup> a celebration of 100 years of Lasallian education in the Philippines, I was, along with the other Lasallian university presidents and rectors gathered from around the world, deeply moved by this story of struggle and sacrifice, the loss of life and the shedding of Lasallian blood during the Second World War, right here in Manila on Taft Avenue.

The anguish of Brother Antonius, haunted by the memory of those events and the suffering of his companions, and the juxtaposition with its consequent awesome flourishing of Lasallian education and mission here in this land called to mind, for me, the struggle of the first Brother teachers with De La Salle, the sacrifices, misunderstandings, abandonment, condemnations, ridicule, hardship, famine and hunger<sup>4</sup> of our beloved confreres, John Baptist de La Salle and his first companions, in seventeenth-century France and the consequent awesome flourishing of our Lasallian educational movement for more than three centuries now all around the globe.

**"When I joined your illustrious brotherhood,  
I renounced the flag of my birth.  
I joined a country of teachers  
that calls its home the planet Earth.  
For how do you measure a mission?  
How do you divide a soul?"**

(from "A Fire in the Soul" in *A Fire in the Soul: A Cantata*)<sup>5</sup>

While recently reading the two-book centennial account of the Lasallian presence here in the Philippines, *With Hearts Aflame* and *The Grace to Touch Hearts*, I was, as the President of Saint Mary's University of Minnesota, keenly aware that we share two of the Lasallian giants of the twentieth century, Brother Benildo Feliciano and Brother Andrew Gonzalez. Both experienced the call to begin their lives as Brothers here in the Philippines. Both were sent abroad to begin their tertiary education in the USA at our college in Minnesota, young Brothers studying at Saint Mary's in Winona, far from home, one delighted in the experience and one already dreaming of life on a larger stage. Both men were prepared and forged as Lasallians, first at home and then abroad. Both men were gifts to this nation and twentieth-century icons for the Lasallian world.

## **3. Lasallian Pedagogy: A Sacred Interaction between Pupil and Teacher**

And so, what is Lasallian pedagogy? It is, first of all, a sacred interaction between pupil and teacher. Lasallian teaching and education is, above all, a gift, a passion, a mission, a calling, a vocation. It is something both mystical and magical, something best understood as a "sacred interaction between pupil and teacher," something that is inspired and that inspires, an energy once tapped into that can be channeled and focused, a fire that burns within, one that needs to be fanned to flame and then tended, and that in the best of situations, if you are really lucky is lived out in a true community of educators that includes teachers and office staff personnel, administrators and cafeteria workers, library aids and coaches....

Lasallians, from the time of the origins onward, have viewed education as mission and not merely as work or profession. For seventeenth-century French educational innovator John Baptist de La Salle grasped that helping teachers tap into a larger vision of what we do and why we do it,<sup>6</sup> a sense of the awesome nobility of our profession, our vocation, our partnership with parents and guardians, with society and church is the fire that fuels the transforming heritage of Lasallian pedagogy.

#### **4. An Innovative Response to Real Human Need**

Lasallian pedagogy is, also, an innovative response to real human need. As Brother Léon Lauraire noted in the first volume of his recent analysis of De La Salle's principal pedagogical writing, *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*,<sup>7</sup> one key characteristic of Lasallian pedagogy is that it is a bold and innovative response to the actual needs of real concrete people. It is a response that is a consequence of perceptive analysis of the reality of specific students, a preferential option for the working class and the poor; but it is one that was always open to the "other poverties" of students.<sup>8</sup>

"Consider," De La Salle wrote,<sup>9</sup> "that it is a practice only too common for the working class and the poor to allow their children to live on their own, roaming all over like vagabonds as long as they are not able to put them to some work; these parents have no concern to send their children to school because their poverty does not allow them to pay teachers, or else, obliged to look for work outside their homes, they have to abandon their children to themselves." This was a world that conflicted with De La Salle's vision of God's love for humanity as expressed in 1 Tm 2:4, a scripture passage in which is expressed the desire of God that all come to the knowledge of truth and that all be saved.<sup>10</sup> Who, then, would announce to them this Good News? Who would be for them the good news that liberated them from the vicious cycle of poverty in which they and their families were trapped?<sup>11</sup>

And so it was, we believe, by "the power of the Holy Spirit, [that De La Salle and his companions were] able to commit [themselves] with determination, if not to change the world, at least to change something in [their] world, to contribute to a breaking up of that infernal cycle of which the poor were the victims."<sup>12</sup>

**"The fire in our soul blazes into infinity  
and will shine like a star for all eternity"**

(from "Soldiers of Faith" in *A Fire in the Soul: A Cantata*)<sup>13</sup>

This mystical vision of education was transformative of the self-awareness and self-worth of students: enhancing their sense of dignity and self-esteem, giving them some power over their own destinies and the financial situation of their families, and preparing them for service to society and Church.<sup>14</sup>

When in the twenty-first century more than one billion people around the globe still suffer the ravages of hunger, malnutrition, illness, illiteracy, and unemployment, wrote our own Brother Peter Phat in his 2006 doctoral dissertation here at the University of San Tomaso,<sup>15</sup> "the cry of the poor is a cry for transforming present social structures from the standpoint of those most

concerned – the oppressed.” The option for the poor, he continued, is “in a special way [and once again], the will of God for our generation.” Those “on the margin, [continue to] cry out in lament about the injustice systems, evoke the memory of God’s plan for creation and the Church, and energize hope to strive toward the Kingdom of God.”<sup>16</sup>

## **5. Schools Functioning in a Spirit of Community, Association, & Solidarity**

Lasallian pedagogy is grounded in a vision of schools functioning in a spirit of community, association, and solidarity. A second key characteristic of Lasallian pedagogy, highlighted by Brother Léon in the second volume of his analysis of *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*, was that it is a community project, a collective and concerted undertaking.<sup>17</sup> And the formulation of the Conduct, something accomplished by the most competent and most experienced Brother teachers, was both a profane and a religious project. The witness of the service of the poor gives credibility and the proclamation of the Word makes intelligible the Good News of the Gospel.

According to Brother Léon, Lasallian pedagogy has a threefold aim: humanization, liberation, and evangelization; and, as such, it is a social, professional, and ecclesial process.<sup>18</sup> In addition, the Lasallian educational project demands competence and skill; it requires that you be a role model (“example makes a much greater impression on the mind and hearts than words”<sup>19</sup>); it functions in everyday life by a spirit of association and solidarity.<sup>20</sup>

Dr. Kristopher White of California in his 2011 doctoral dissertation at the University of San Francisco<sup>21</sup> identifies the seven key dimensions of Lasallian pedagogy as: a) student-centeredness, b) holistic education, c) constructive scaffolding, d) collaboration, e) social justice,<sup>22</sup> f) relevancy, and g) discipleship; and he calls these “the complex, pragmatic, radical educational vision of De La Salle for the twenty-first century.”<sup>23</sup>

Much of recent Lasallian scholarship, he posits, has been overly focused on the spiritual dimension of Lasallian education and the dispositions necessary to be a Lasallian educator to the detriment of the practice of Lasallian pedagogy in terms of how Lasallian pedagogy informs teachers in the design of curriculum and the content of classroom instruction.<sup>24</sup> He cautions that the real need today is for the community of Lasallian educators to work together in solidarity to understand what Lasallian pedagogy will signify moving forward with its present-day meanings and possibilities.<sup>25</sup>

## **6. The Success of the Schools Depended on the Quality of the Teachers**

A third key characteristic of Lasallian pedagogy, highlighted by Brother Léon in the third volume of his study of the Conduct,<sup>26</sup> was that the success of the schools depended on the quality of the teachers; and this required their initial and ongoing formation.<sup>27</sup>

Charles Démia of Lyon, a cleric and contemporary of De La Salle’s, wrote in 1688 about the poor condition of teachers in seventeenth-century France. “We see today, unfortunately, the holy and exalted teaching vocation given over to anyone who comes along, just because he happens to be able to read and write. Although these teachers are often in poor health and bad straits and perhaps addicted to vice as well, we do not hesitate to hand over to them the care of our young

people. We do not seem to realize that by doing something to help these wretches, we are doing a real harm to the public at large ... No wonder that the occupation [of teaching] is so despised, when it is so often undertaken by people who are so miserable, unknown, and of no quality whatsoever.”<sup>28</sup>

De La Salle’s main concern all throughout his life was the formation and accompaniment of teachers. For him, it was direct and personal; it was lived out in community; it was why they communicated by monthly letters; and it was accomplished by visits, significant gatherings, and retreats of the Brother teachers.<sup>29</sup>

A professor at Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota – one of my colleagues – recently expressed it like this: “De La Salle was able to develop untrained, under-educated, ill-mannered tradesmen to be effective educators of boys from poor and working class families. He accomplished this through a systematized, goal-oriented, evidence-based approach where teacher development and evaluation were inter-dependent and provided continual evidence of improvement and efficacy.”<sup>30</sup>

In addressing the question of faculty development, Dr. Susan Hines concludes that “De La Salle’s teacher development practices suggest it is essential to reduce [the inherently complex dynamic of variables present within teachers, students, and organizational structures] by a) developing a unified direction, b) establishing a shared vision and common understanding of good teaching, c) designing faculty development to promote a dedication to improvement, and d) measuring perpetual growth through continual feedback loops using communities of practice.”<sup>31</sup>

## 7. A Few Closing Comments

Ours is a vast worldwide educational network that can and does make the world a better place. We have some one million students in over 80 countries. Approximately one hundred thousand of them are here in the Philippines. Some institutions are educational centers of awe-inspiring academic excellence.<sup>32</sup> Others are educational centers of creative and heroic response to urgent need.<sup>33</sup>

**“Walk with me, dear brother[s and sisters],  
link your arm with mine.  
We go forth to do God’s work  
to complete his grand design!”**

(from “Finale” in *A Fire in the Soul: A Cantata*)<sup>34</sup>

A momentum for partnership all around the globe is building. As expressed in the words of your centennial cantata: “Walk with me, dear brothers [and sisters], link your arms with mine. We go forth to do God’s work to complete his grand design.” The desire on the part of Lasallians to participate more intentionally continues to grow. We want to do something great together – Brothers and Lasallian Partners around the globe; members of Boards of Trustees, parents, and former students; teachers, coaches, counselors, secretaries and support staff; Young Lasallians and our older friends.

Know that the Lasallian Family in the Philippines is known and esteemed by many around the Lasallian world, myself included, for the good work that you do each and every day for the young, for the adult learner, and for their families in the classroom or in the office, in the cafeteria or in the corridors, on the playing fields or in other co-curricular activities.

Our world, our Church, and our countries, our young and the poor and their families, deserve a better education than is on offer across much of the globe. As Brother Álvaro Rodríguez, Superior General, said in his 2012 address here in the Philippines to the international gathering of presidents and rectors of Lasallian universities: “Our universities [and, by extension, our schools] should dream about a better world, question inhuman structures and ideologies, and collaborate so that a new world is born.”<sup>35</sup>

And so let’s not forget that the God of history, the God of the poor, raised up our Lasallian Family in the Church and in the world so that all of the children of God might know “what it means to experience a genuinely human life and a renewed Christianity”<sup>36</sup> and so that no youngster and no family and so that no student or adult learner – no matter how economically, affectively, intellectually, or spiritually in need – should ever think that they have been forgotten or should ever have to wonder whether or not they’ve been passed over by God or by the rest of us. This is the fire that fuels the transforming heritage of Lasallian pedagogy.

God bless the Lasallian mission and Lasallian Family here in the Philippines! May the fire in your souls continue to burn bright! Congratulations on the many accomplishments celebrated during this Centennial Year! Thank you for your kind attention!

### Notes

1. Cf. John Fuellenbach SVD, *Throw Fire* (Manilla, Philippines: Logos Publications, 1998).
2. Von de Guzman and Vicente Garcia Groyon, *A Fire in the Soul: A Cantata* (Lasallian Philippines Centennial, 2011-2012).
3. International Association of Lasallian Universities, Encuentro X, Manila, 26 February to 1 March 2012.
4. We concentrate on 1694 as the anniversary of the Vow of Association for the Educational Service of the Poor and sometimes forget the backdrop against which this occurred. It is estimated that between 1.3 and 3 million of 22 million French people died in the awful cold and famine of 1693-1694.
5. Von de Guzman and Vicente Garcia Groyon, *A Fire in the Soul: A Cantata* (Lasallian Philippines Centennial, 2011-2012).
6. Cf. *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* for images of educators as “ambassadors” of a world not yet realized, “architects” of a new tomorrow, and “good shepherds” seeking out the lost and excluded.

7. *Cahiers Lasalliens (CL) 61: The Conduct of Schools, A Contextual Approach* (Rome 2008 Translation) by Brother Léon Lauraire,

8. For example, the Sunday schools for older brothers who had missed out on the possibility of what was now on offer for their younger brothers, the delinquent center for wayward youngsters and adults at Saint Yon, or the schools for the children of merchants in Marseille and Rouen.

9. Cf. *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* by John Baptist de La Salle.

10. Cf. *Meditations* 193.

11. Who would help them to come to know this truth? Who would teach them the skills, the civility and the politeness, and the correct pronunciation that would make entrance into society a possibility? Who would teach them the reading, writing, and counting that would allow them a greater sense of their own dignity?

12. Brother Michel Sauvage, “The Gospel Journey of John Baptist de La Salle” in *Spirituality in the Time of John Baptist de La Salle* (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1999), pp. 239-240.

13. Von de Guzman and Vicente Garcia Groyon, *A Fire in the Soul: A Cantata* (Lasallian Philippines Centennial, 2011-2012).

14. CL 61, p. 26.

15. Peter Nguyen van Phat, *The Prophetic Role of the De La Salle Brothers Among the Poor in Vietnam*. S.T.D. dissertation, University of Santo Tomas, Philippines, 2006.

16. Peter Nguyen van Phat, pp. 1-2, 3, 172.

17. CL 62: *The Conduct of Schools, Pedagogical Approach* (Rome 2006 Translation) by Brother Léon Lauraire.

18. CL 62, pp. 189, 204.

19. *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* by John Baptist de La Salle.

20. CL 62, pp. 246-250.

21. Kristopher White, *The Frequency of Implementation of Lasallian Pedagogy in Traditional College-Preparatory High Schools Sponsored by the De La Salle Christian Brothers in the United States*. Ed.D. dissertation, University of San Francisco, 2011.

22. Faith has a social dimension.

23. Cf. *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education*, Vol. 3, No. 2, June 2012.
24. Kristopher White, pp. i, 2-3, 7, 142.
25. Kristopher White, p. 6.
26. CL 63: *The Conduct of Schools, A Comparative Approach* (Rome 2011 Translation) by Brother Léon Lauraire.
27. CL 63, p. 143.
28. Brother Michel Sauvage, “The Gospel Journey of John Baptist de La Salle” in *Spirituality in the Time of John Baptist de La Salle* (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1999), pp. 231-232.
29. CL 63, p. 147.
30. Susan R. Hines, “Evaluating Faculty Development: Looking to the Past to Improve the Future.” Unpublished document. [Editor’s Note: This source has since been published. See article of the same title in *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 3, no. 3.]
31. Susan R. Hines.
32. For example, De La Salle University here in Manila; La Salle High School in Kagoshima, Japan; Collège Saint Marc in Alexandria, Egypt; La Salle Bonanova in Barcelona, Spain; La Salle College High School in Philadelphia, USA.
33. For example, Bahay Pagasa [House of Hope] center for delinquent youth in Bacolod City; the classroom caravans for gypsies in France; the telephone Help Line outreach in Australia; the Martin de Porres special education schools in New York City, USA; and the teacher training initiative presently underway in South Sudan.
34. Von de Guzman and Vicente Garcia Groyon, *A Fire in the Soul: A Cantata* (Lasallian Philippines Centennial, 2011-2012).
35. “Lasallian Universities: Communities of Memory and Hope for Society Today” in *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education*, Vol. 3, No. 2, June 2012.
36. Brother Michel Sauvage, “The Gospel Journey of John Baptist de La Salle” in *Spirituality in the Time of John Baptist de La Salle* (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1999), p. 246; and Jn 10:10.