

Beal, Rose M. Annotation of “Apostles, Prophets, Ambassadors and Angels: De La Salle’s *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* and the Apostolic Imagination.” by Michael M. Valenzuela, Ph.D. diss., De La Salle University – Lipa, Lipa, Republic of the Philippines, 2004. *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 4, no. 2 (Institute for Lasallian Studies at Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota: 2013).

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## ANNOTATION

Valenzuela, Michael M. “Apostles, Prophets, Ambassadors, and Angels: De La Salle’s *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* and the Apostolic Imagination.” Ph.D. dissertation, De La Salle University – Lipa, Lipa, Republic of the Philippines, 2004, 390 pp.

Michael Valenzuela proposes that De La Salle’s *Meditations for the Time of Retreat (MR)* provide a relevant framework for supporting catechists in their spiritual development today. The author’s thesis is that the Lasallian metaphor of “eyes of faith” correlates with “paradigmatic imagination” capable of interpreting and interiorizing scriptural revelation and actualizing it through lived apostolic ministry. His research is based on contemporary interpretation of De La Salle’s history and work as well as recent scholarship on imagination and its relation to faith.

In introducing De La Salle’s life and work, Valenzuela highlights four aspects of his spiritual experience that contribute to the writing of the *MR*. First, he summarizes De La Salle’s experience of God as an encounter with the God of Life, the God of the Poor, and the God of Providence (85-90). Second, he describes a pattern in De La Salle’s spiritual life: starting from an awareness of the realities of the present context, the apostolic minister interprets those realities “with the eyes of faith, that is to say, in light of God’s revelation” and then commits to a transformative response as “a participation in God’s creative-redemptive activity,” trusting in God with full acceptance of the cost that commitment might bring (84). Third, he describes the Founder’s “journey of redemptive incarnation” in which he progressively abandoned himself to God’s call to be the living presence of divine love in the lives of the poor, particularly poor youth (90-93). Lastly, he presents De La Salle’s understanding of ministry as both gift and task whereby God both creates the possibility of ministry and calls the individual to live out that possibility (93-97). Valenzuela proposes that the *MR*, written to invite teachers to a new understanding of their ministry, offer “scriptural paradigms for the re-imagination of one’s life ... capable of disrupting their [religious educators’] conventional experience of lived reality and opening one up to the dimension of the sacred in the ordinary” (101). He continues with concise individual summaries of the meditations followed by commentaries unpacking their contribution to the spiritual development of teachers (190-96).

At the core of Valenzuela’s argument is his presentation of contemporary scholarship regarding imagination. He defines imagination as “the structuring, composing activity by which human beings integrate the data of sense, affect, and cognition to create coherent, patterned and unified presentations” (169). He highlights the critical-realist approach to imagination which emphasizes that “our understanding of things comes about through the interaction of creative imagination and objective reality” where reality refers to God’s self-revelation which is made known analogically through “metaphors, stories and symbols” (178-79). He introduces the term *paradigm* – “constructs that embody selective patterns which in turn display the constitutive structure of other more complex or less accessible realities” (177) – to describe the imaginative function at play in translating scripture to a lived faith.

Valenzuela then links the contemporary concept of *paradigmatic imagination* to De La Salle's metaphor of the *eyes of faith* that allow a person to interpret experience in light of divine revelation, especially as received through scripture. He identifies three elements of De La Salle's teaching that correspond to the practice of paradigmatic imagination: "that seeing with the eyes of faith refers to reinterpreting reality in the light of Christian revelation; ... that the capacity to 'see' in this way is a grace of the Holy Spirit; and ... that sacred scripture plays an indispensable role in this activity" (214). He concludes with the claim that it is precisely the engagement with the paradigmatic imagination that makes De La Salle's *MR* useful today and calls for readers today to be led by the Founder in the imaginative process "to engage these [scriptural] forms themselves and allow them to shed light on present praxis" (234).

Valenzuela posits that in the *MR* De La Salle set forth God's plan of redemption as the "master paradigm" for interpreting the ministry of the catechist-teacher (240). Valenzuela argues that De La Salle's intention in the *MR* was to foster a new perspective on the work of the teacher as an apostolic vocation expressed in dispositions such as zeal, abandonment to providence, gratuity and disinterestedness (249-60). Valenzuela further identifies seven "subsidiary paradigms" used in the *MR* to describe that ministry – the teacher as ambassador of Christ, master builder, good shepherd, branch on the vine, guardian angel, prophet and steward (240). He documents each paradigm in the *MR* and explores at length the challenges they present to catechists today. This exposition is the culmination of his argument, engaging De La Salle's use of scriptural metaphors to today's situation through the exercise of paradigmatic imagination. Valenzuela's examples often reflect the contemporary realities in the Philippines (his home country), such as families separated by overseas employment and the prevalence of extreme poverty. Other issues, such as the participation of the laity in the life of the Church and rampant secular consumerism, resonate globally as contemporary issues.

Valenzuela's conclusion is twofold. First, De La Salle's exhortation that the Brother teachers see through the eyes of faith corresponds to contemporary theories about the role of imagination in the life of faith in that both call for the individual's internalization of scriptural revelation in order to actualize the call to discipleship in her or his life. Second, today's readers can find paradigms for apostolic ministry as teachers in De La Salle's *MR*; these paradigms and the invitation to apply them represent the real value of the *MR* for spiritual development of catechists today, much more so than the specific application of those paradigms recommended by De La Salle. Valenzuela identifies a number of areas for continued inquiry, all of which surround the "turn to imagination" in catechesis, biblical studies and morality (375-77).

In this dissertation, Valenzuela integrates Lasallian scholarship with contemporary theology to revitalize the potential contribution of De La Salle's *MR* to the spiritual development of catechists. Three aspects of the study are particularly relevant to the Lasallian higher education community. First, Valenzuela's study resonates with contemporary issues in the life of the Church, addressing an issue – the spiritual development of teachers – that is not uniquely Lasallian but which is clearly of concern to the Lasallian community. In doing so, he demonstrates that the Lasallian experience has something to say to the church as a whole regarding Christian life and ministry. Second, he deepens the analysis of De La Salle's writings. Valenzuela takes his reader into an analysis of De La Salle's project that illuminates a clear distinction between De La Salle's spiritual method – which can be seen to be timeless – and the

practical conclusions the Founder drew from that method – which may be outmoded today. Lastly, Valenzuela’s dissertation is *de facto* an invitation to the Lasallian world to examine the Founder’s teachings in light of scholarly developments in other communities. He demonstrates that encounter with the larger community can enrich the Lasallian interpretation of the community’s history and charism and ensure its continuing relevance.