

Shifting the Narrative: De La Salle at Parmenie

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For well over three decades, the Brothers of the Christian Schools (De La Salle Christian Brothers) have invited faculty, staff, administrators, and students at their Lasallian schools around the globe to learn more about their Lasallian educational mission and their founder, Saint Jean Baptiste de La Salle. They have offered a number of mission-related activities, ranging from a one-hour introduction to intensive course study. Along the way, learners encounter the word "Parmenie," a place name with a lilting allure that captures the imagination.

De La Salle sojourned late in his life to the out-of-the-way mountaintop retreat, Parmenie, located in southeastern France near Grenoble. He went, in part, to escape pressing administrative demands and lawsuits. Today, we might say that De La Salle experienced a burnout or an "existential crisis" brought on by hard work and unrelenting professional demands. At Parmenie, De La Salle, with the assistance of Sister Louise, created a retreat. He emerged spiritually refreshed and responded to the call of his Brothers to return to his leadership, faithful to his vocation.

Studying the events at Parmenie through the lens of a museum studies approach focusing on displays reveals a shift in the Lasallian narrative. Artists in the early twentieth century produced paintings and stained glass window cycles that emphasized the saintly De La Salle. The De La Salle Christian Brothers in recent years have shifted to emphasize the founder's humanity. They have done this, in part, by placing Parmenie as a narrative doorway that reveals the humanity of the saint. This is evident in their action plan document, *Circular 469*, and in their major exhibits at the Hotel De La Salle in Reims, France and the Generalate in Rome. Parmenie reflects the founder's humanity by focusing on one of his most vulnerable moments. Rather than the saintly figure in stained glass with his eyes cast upward toward the clouds, he is like us. He has made hard choices and emerged world-weary.

The spiritual retreat at Parmenie revises what it means to be "in mission." The Brothers of the Christian Schools and their Lasallian partners have shaped a narrative that resonates with their current situation and worldview. It is described in a word: Parmenie. De La Salle left his mountaintop retreat continuing to conform to the will of God. The message is that his life and mission had meaning and points to a greater purpose for our activities.

Narrative Psychology

In many ways, we are the stories that we tell about ourselves. We all edit, often cutting unfavorable incidents from our narrative. Sometimes, when we retell stories, we draw strength from some particular event or encounter. In *Retelling the Stories of Our Lives: Everyday*

Narrative Therapy to Draw Inspiration and Transform Experience, David Denborough explains how this creative process of self-creation also changes how we live. In Denborough's workshops on Narrative Therapy, practitioners encourage people, many of whom have experienced trauma, into "re-storying" their narrative.² In the field of American politics, this recasting of a narrative is called a "pivot." The politician who does not like how the public perceives his or her life, changes positions or puts a new spin on events.

Sometimes a change in name marks an individual's dramatic shift. Saul, a persecutor of Jews, became Paul, the Christian. Norma Jeane Mortensen left her traumatic life as foster child and orphan to become Marilyn Monroe. Even little Davey Jones recast himself as larger-than-life pop icon David Bowie. Organizations have experienced this as well. Lee Iacocca took a struggling Chrysler Corporation and reinvented it. This narrative shift can extend to religious sites. For instance, the pilgrimage church of Santiago de Compostela, in northwest Spain, changed the image of its namesake from the bellicose knight on horseback cutting down Muslims, the Matamoros, to the simple pilgrim with the broad brimmed hat, walking stick, and shell.

The Brothers of the Christian Schools have crafted a revised narrative. Since the 1960s, they have experienced a significant decline in the number of De La Salle Christian Brothers. They have worked diligently to increase vocations; yet, only a few men have joined their community. This may be the result of societal trends and therefore, largely out of their control. In recent years, however, the De La Salle Christian Brothers have attracted many new vocations in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. They have seen increases in the United States with more and better candidates. Yet, some within the community continue to express anxiety and wonder aloud about their future.

The De La Salle Christian Brothers have transformed their narrative. While the decline in vocations continues to be of great concern, rather than focusing on the declining numbers, they have chosen to celebrate that there are more students and educators in their schools worldwide than ever before. They have set an agenda to create formation programs for lay partners at their schools. The De La Salle Christian Brothers, perhaps unintentionally, drew on their past and crafted a new storyline that resonates with the historical present: *Parmenie!*

The Saintly Narrative

The Roman Catholic Church canonized De La Salle in 1900. The Brothers celebrated Saint John Baptist de La Salle in a number of works of art. They commissioned the Italian painter Giovanni Gagliardi to produce historically themed paintings. They also commissioned two cycles of stained glass windows to celebrate De La Salle, the first of which dates to 1900, but was recently conserved and installed at Manhattan College, New York in 2016.³ The artists for the Manhattan College windows created ten scenes. The original audience was the De La Salle Christian Brothers and those in formation. The windows include a number of key moments from the life of De La Salle; however, they do not include *Parmenie*.

The second series, commissioned in 1935, is at the Generalate in Rome and sets out the most important events in the life of their founder. The Brothers transferred De La Salle's relics from Belgium to the "Mother House" in Rome. As a result, this chapel became the most sacred site for

Lasallians. These windows celebrate his sanctity. The twenty-four scenes on the side aisle and apse illuminate key moments in De La Salle's life. They include such core images as the saint venerating Mary, giving away his wealth, and working at his schools.

In the core narrative, De La Salle emerges as an intelligent and religious young man in seventeenth century France. Named Church Canon of Rheims Cathedral at 16, he continued his studies. He was ordained a priest and eventually earned his doctorate in theology. He changed his life when he began founding schools for boys of the poor and artisans. De La Salle used his formidable organizational skills and relied on God's providence for his activities. He gathered young men to him and transformed them into teachers. He eventually gave away his wealth and dedicated his life to education. He died in France having set up many schools and had gathered a number of "Brothers" to him. Ultimately, these celebratory images capture the core story. Occasionally, difficulties are included, but De La Salle emerges as having been propelled to success and sanctity.

The Prominence of Parmenie

Brother Leo Burkhart, a De La Salle Christian Brother, researched Parmenie's history.⁴ He wrote about its importance as a pilgrimage church and its early associations as a place of worship. Brother Leo recounted how the site had fallen into disrepair and how Sister Louise Hours dedicated her life to rebuilding the site. She staffed the site, raised funds, and secured the support of Church administrators. In the course of her efforts, she counseled De La Salle in March and April 1714, when he observed a retreat at the site. On 1 April 1714, during Easter, some of the leading Brothers gathered together to write a letter to De La Salle. They commanded him to return to his leadership position, reminding him of his vow of obedience. De La Salle responded and returned to his responsibilities. Because of Brother Leo's research and advocacy, the De La Salle Christian Brothers, in 1964, purchased the Parmenie site. It remains a place of retreat.

Cornerstone Event

The Brothers of the Christian Schools placed Parmenie at the beginning of their reflections on the 45th General Chapter in *Circular 469* of November 2014, "This Work of God is also Our Work." Having convened the Chapter on the Tuesday after Easter, the leadership of the De La Salle Christian Brothers placed Parmenie and the Gospel story of Emmaus, *Luke 24:13-34*, as their point of departure for the document. After inspiring a great deal of deliberation, the Circular provided an action plan for the Institute.⁵ The pairing of the touchstones of Parmenie and Emmaus provides insight into the tone of the General Chapter. At the beginning of the Circular, the De La Salle Brothers write eloquently about the challenges of increased administrative demands, declining number of Brothers, and the lack of time for prayer and reflection. Yet, the De La Salle Brothers are to be encouraged by the model of leadership provided by De La Salle at Parmenie and the Easter promise evident at Emmaus.

Luke's Gospel narrative takes place after the crucifixion of Jesus and the discovery of the empty tomb. Two travelers are walking from Jerusalem toward Emmaus after the crucifixion of Jesus. Someone joins them on the road. The three enter into a discussion of the events surrounding Jesus in Jerusalem. Upon arriving at Emmaus, the three sit down for a meal. With a prayer and

the breaking of the bread, the stranger is revealed to be Jesus. The two travelers recognize him, and he disappears before their eyes. They realize that it had been Jesus the whole time. The duo immediately returns to Jerusalem with the news that Jesus is truly alive. In both events, individuals return to the group, and the events illustrate the core statement of the De La Salle Christian Brothers that we are in the holy presence of God.

In their document, the De La Salle Christian Brothers altered the narrative of De La Salle. The triumphant founder is still visible, but the story is from a time of crisis. There is joy, but it is tempered by a difficult retreat and the way of the cross. The De La Salle Christian Brothers identify with their founder and draw on a Savior, both of whom have made choices and faced significant crises. Just as Parmenie is present in *Circular 469*, the Brothers featured it in their major exhibits in Rheims (2015) and the updated exhibit in Rome (2016).

De La Salle House Museum

In May 2015, the De La Salle Christian Brothers opened a spacious new exhibit within the Hotel de Saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle in Reims. De La Salle was born 30 April 1651 and grew up in the sizable Renaissance home dating to 1545. The exhibition design team created an immersive experience that highlights the life of De La Salle and contextualizes the Institute. Visitors learn about the urban setting, view a number of video programs, and are even placed in a classroom.

The designers positioned Parmenie at a pivotal location in the exhibit, on the doorway that leads to the final exhibition room, which features the contemporary Lasallian world. Designers fabricated a doorway panel that features a contemporary image of the mountain retreat with a cross and a reproduction of the letter that called De La Salle back to his duties. As with the rest of the exhibit, the text is available in French, English, and Spanish. Visitors must pass through Parmenie to enter the last room.

The exhibit text makes it clear: “This is why, Sir, we beg you very humble [sic] and we order you in the name and of behalf [sic] of the body of the Society to which you have promised obedience, to take up responsibility again immediately for the over government of our Society.” The Brothers encouraged their founder to fulfill his obligations. Carry on the work! It has made all the difference.

The final room has seating and provides a place where priests can celebrate Mass or students can gather for a lesson. Just as in *Circular 469*, visitors pass through Parmenie. If a Mass were being said, the visitors would experience Christ in the breaking of the bread. It is the Easter miracle, Christ suddenly among us in the bread and wine transformed into the body and blood of Jesus. It is through this lens that the work and mission of the Brothers of the Christian Schools are brought into the present. Visitors can view a video that illustrates current Lasallian activities surrounded by maps that demonstrate the worldwide Lasallian educational network. On a smaller map of France, a Lasallian star marks Reims, which demonstrates the importance of the house and the work of the Institute.

Generalate De La Salle Museum

The De La Salle Christian Brothers community in Rome updated their museum in 2016 with an exhibit highlighting the life, writings, and impact of De La Salle. The curators selected a number of the Saint's personal items and early editions of his books. Visitors can see a section on Lasallian saints, and the exhibit concludes with a mural that includes a map depicting the international scope of Lasallian activities. It is in a compact area near the entrance to the "Mother House."

One of the first areas features eighteen events in the life of De La Salle. The list starts with points that are depicted in the stained glass in the nearby De La Salle chapel, which was examined earlier. The exhibit curators included Parmenie as the fourteenth of the eighteen events: "1714: moment of crisis. La Salle is at the south of France and he shelters in Parmenie. He will return to Paris by the request of the Brothers who live through difficult moments." This exhibit text is followed by point fifteen: "1715 in [sic] forward: De La Salle lives in Rouen. The pursuit does not stop, but he continues forming with the Brothers, writing the Rule together with them and the books that are going to be base of Lasallian pedagogy and the spirituality." Taken together, points fourteen and fifteen underline the significance of Parmenie. De La Salle returned and completed his work. Visitors can see the founder's writing on pedagogy and spirituality. You can see the results of his lifelong efforts.

In the current content, the final point is noteworthy. Point eighteen states, "1719: the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools at the death of De La Salle: 101 Brothers, twenty-six communities at France and one community at Rome." During his lifetime, the Lasallian world was comparatively small. Just as the Brothers 300 years ago were unsure of the future, it is not clear now. The De La Salle Christian Brothers and their lay partners have thrust Parmenie to the front of their narrative as a metaphor for our time. De La Salle, world-weary, went to a retreat in southern France. Sister Louise Hours provided a place for reflection and discernment. As the exhibit text in Rome succinctly states: "1714: moment of crisis."

Narrative Meaning

People bring their own perspectives to Parmenie. From the view of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, the idea of obedience becomes a central theme. In a moment when De La Salle was spiritually depleted, he emerged ready to be obedient to his vows. Sister Louise Hours facilitated the retreat and likely encouraged De La Salle to be faithful to his vows. Finally, the local church officials also played a role. They sanctioned Sister Louise's work and provided limited support. They also supplied priests to occasionally say Mass at the site and encouraged contacts for financial support. When taken together, the message could be broader than a call by the Brothers and obedience to a request. It is that the Brother's community, a woman religious, the regional church, and lay support created a moment to discern God's will. As the Brothers of the Christian Schools put forth in *Circular 469*, we find Parmenie and Emmaus. The narrative includes people along the way. Parmenie also stands as a warning for our overly full lives with significant demands.

The narrative shift within the Lasallian community reflects the anxiety of the current moment but also holds out hope. It is an Easter hope that we are in the holy presence of God. If anything, it

underlines that the difficult moments are worth it. It also calls on Lasallians to create moments to pray, but also to complete the necessary work of the schools entrusted to their care.

Questions for Consideration

1. Reflecting on De La Salle, what key moments come to mind? What do these reveal about your work as a Lasallian?
2. If you were to create a narrative of your life as a Lasallian, what three to five events would you include? Why?
3. The event at Parmenie is built around a retreat. When was the last time that you took time to reflect and pray? What difference, if any, did this make in your life?

Endnotes

1. Dennis H. Cremin is an associate professor in the history department at Lewis University in Romeoville, IL. He earned a PhD degree at Loyola University, Chicago.

2. Stephen Madigan, *Narrative Therapy*, (Portland: Ringgold, Inc, 2011) and David Hiles and Ivo Cermak, "Narrative Psychology," C. Willig & W. Stainton-Rogers (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research in psychology* (pp. 147-164), Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.

3. "Illuminations: De La Salle Windows Unveiled at Manhattan College," *District of Eastern North America: Brothers of the Christian Schools*, April 7, 2016 [Accessed on October 20, 2017, <http://www.fscdena.org/2016/04/07/illuminations-de-la-salle-windows-to-be-unveiled-at-manhattan-college/>].

4. Leo Burkhart, FSC, and Luke Salm, FSC, *Encounters: De La Salle at Parmenie*, 1983, [accessed June 15, 2016, <http://www.delasalle.org.nz/dox/Encounters - De La Salle at Parmenie.pdf>] Luke Salm, FSC, author of the most approachable biography on De la Salle, edited, augmented, and translated Brother Leo Burkhart's text into English.

5. Brothers of the Christian Schools, *Circular 469*, November 30, 2015 [accessed October 20, 2017, http://www.lasalle.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Circ469_Actas45CG_eng.pdf].