

## Elements of Lasallian Spirituality

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What is the added something that the Catholic religion brings to the work of higher education? A little bit of insight can be gained from the way that faculty, staff, and administrators go about their work in the institution in which I work. The traditions of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools give a particular color to the Catholic religion as it is lived here. Inspired by Saint John Baptist de La Salle and a three-hundred-year-old educational practice, Lasallian educators, led these days more and more by lay partners, have cultivated a distinctive spirituality, which enlivens the work that they do with their students.

Recently, a number of partners and colleagues gathered at our college to reflect on the history, pedagogy, and spirituality of Lasallian education.<sup>3</sup> Together the participants gave expression to a set of tenets of the Lasallian spirit of education. Briefly, these tenets are:

- faith and zeal considered together;
- prayer;
- recognition of the divinely-charged humanity of our students, especially those with disadvantaged circumstances;
- salvation; and
- the role of guardian angels assumed by Lasallian educators.

It is an indication of the vitality of the special grace, or charism, given to the Brothers at their founding that the participants at this gathering called out faith and zeal as fundamental elements of the spirituality of the Lasallian educator. The original *Rule* of the Institute of the Brothers (dated 1718)<sup>4</sup> describes faith as the first great gift to the Brother teachers, one that induces them to look upon everything they do in their work in light of their relationship with God. Zeal, their second special gift, is a burning desire for the instruction and spiritual welfare of their students. There is a palpable liveliness present among our peers today that is a mark of these gifts of faith and the desire to teach.

Prayerfulness speaks to the way that we prepare and maintain ourselves as educators. We remind ourselves individually and corporately of God's presence on our campus. Various forms of liturgy, meditation, and occasional retreats provide opportunities for needed refocusing in the midst of the busy demands of college life.

In the language of De La Salle, his Brothers were to recognize and adore Jesus in the poor rags of the children sent to them.<sup>5</sup> For us today, this means really seeing our students and one another. Allowing the full humanity of those before us in the work that we do opens us to the mystery of

the world charged with divinity. God entered the world in the distressing guise of a poor child. Saint John Baptist de La Salle wrote in his meditation for Christmas Eve,

For how long has Jesus been presenting himself to you and knocking at the door of your heart to make his dwelling within you, and you have not wanted to receive him? Why? Because he only presents himself under the form of a poor man, a slave, a man of sorrows.<sup>6</sup>

For Lasallian educators, everyone has a dignity; and if the circumstances of their lives mask the divinity within them, then the urgency of our call to seek out and share with them what we have is all the greater. Sharpening our vision to see the face of God in all those in need of a quality education, especially the poor, awakens us to the holiness of all people, colleagues and visitors alike.

Lasallian educators are cooperators in the salvation of students.<sup>7</sup> We seek, through the ministry of education, to help lead our students to God<sup>8</sup> – that at the end of their lives they will experience the beatific vision.<sup>9</sup> But salvation touches this life also in a very tangible way. Consider the parable of the Good Samaritan<sup>10</sup> and the Beatitudes.<sup>11</sup> Together with our students we strive to build up the human community, ensuring for them and for all, in the language of Pope Francis, the three Ls – labor, lodging, and land.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, Lasallian spirituality leads its adherents to see themselves as guardian angels for those they educate.<sup>13</sup> Saint John Baptist de La Salle employed the image of Jacob’s Ladder<sup>14</sup> to remind his followers of their charge to go up to God in prayer for the sake of their students and to return to meet their students as brothers and sisters, speaking the same language and walking side by side in the pathways of education.<sup>15</sup>

## Endnotes

1. These reflections, which are slightly modified here, were originally posted by the author on the blog of the Cummins Institute of Saint Mary’s College of California [<https://cumminsinstitute.com/2017/06/20/elements-of-lasallian-spirituality/>].

2. Brother Charles Hilken, FSC, is both a professor of history and the director of the Bishop John S. Cummins Institute for Catholic Thought, Culture, and Action at Saint Mary’s College of California.

3. Long-time associate registrar Leslie Welty organized a three-day workshop that was attended by twenty colleagues. The workshop ended with a consideration of the last of these themes. The workshop was entitled “Mini-Buttimer Conference,” and it was conducted at Saint Mary’s College in June 2017.

4. Cf. “Rule of 1718” in *Rule and Foundational Documents* by John Baptist de La Salle (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 2002), chapter two, pages 16-19.

5. Cf. Meditation #96.3 in *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle* (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1994).
6. Meditation #85.1 in *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*.
7. Cf. Meditation #193 to #208 in *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle* (for example, see Meditation #201.3).
8. For example, see Meditation #101.3 in *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*.
9. For example, see Meditation #201.3 in *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*.
10. Cf. *Luke* 10:25-37. Stuart Mill (1806-1873) “was an English philosopher, political economist, and civil servant.” Cf. John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (1863).
11. Cf. *Matthew* 5:1-12 and *Luke* 6:20-26.
12. Cf. Pope Francis, “United Nations Address,” 25 September 2015.
13. Cf. Meditation #198.1 in *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*.
14. Cf. *Genesis* 28:12 and Meditation #198.1 in *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*.
15. These thoughts are the results of the collective reflection born of the experiences of a group of colleagues at Saint Mary’s College. They are offered as an invitation to dialogue about the spirituality of a Catholic educator. They are offered in love.