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Nurturing Lasallian Spirituality Today: A Journey from Affectionately Grateful Former Students to Lasallian Associates

William Mann, FSC²

Introduction

Good afternoon. Let's begin again, then, on this actual anniversary of the Heroic Vow of 1691,³ by recalling this morning's remarks about the "providential journey" of Saint John Baptist de La Salle . . . "one heart, one commitment, one life."

When De La Salle reflects – in his own words – on the beginnings – *and this is the first of my five points* – when the layman Adrien Nyel comes from Rouen and, at the convent of the Sisters of the Infant Child Jesus, asks for his help in opening schools for poor boys in and around Rheims.

"Come," he said with a gracious air, "stay with me. My home is a residence where parish priests from the country and other priests who are my friends often stay."

"I had thought," he wrote in a *Memoir*⁴ which he composed later on to inform the Brothers about the means Divine Providence had used to establish their Institute, "that the care which I took of the schools and the teachers would only be external, something which would not involve me any further than to provide for their subsistence and see to it that they carried out their duties with piety and assiduity."

"Indeed, if I had ever thought that the care I was taking of the schoolmasters out of pure charity would ever have made it my duty to live with them, I would have dropped the whole project."

"It was undoubtedly for this reason that God, who guides all things with wisdom and serenity and whose way it is not to force the inclinations of persons, willed to commit me entirely to the development of the schools. *God did this* in an imperceptible way and over a long period of time, so that one commitment led to another in a way that I did not foresee in the beginning."

As we celebrate this 300th anniversary Lasallian jubilee – "one heart, one commitment, one life" – we have an occasion to remember the life and accomplishments of the Founder, whose interactions led him by imperceptible design out "beyond the borders" of the first dreams of a young man and the social set of his family and canonry. As he himself said, "God did this."

Stories of Remembrance and Gratitude

We often talk about what De La Salle accomplished, but De La Salle writes about God having done all of this. Might then the “providential spirit” of what we call Lasallian “spirit-uality,” then, be better thought of as something God accomplishes – albeit with our cooperation – in and through our own life’s journey rather than something that we do for God, or whatever “higher power” one or other of us might honor.

We, also, have an occasion during this jubilee – *and this is my second point* – to reflect on our own Lasallian journeys

- from being a student who found ourselves enrolled – often at a young age – in a school that identifies as Lasallian.
- to one whose school experience is remembered with great affection and gratitude.
- to the point where we found ourselves – perhaps more than many of our other classmates – being drawn ever deeper into the Lasallian story and its unfolding mission.

I am mindful today of so many stories of fond remembrance and gratitude shared with me over the years.

- a successful businessman and widower . . . whose father died while he was in secondary school and so his family was unable to pay for him to continue attending school . . . yet, he remained in the school . . . was given a job each afternoon . . . and a sandwich, which would miraculously materialize in the hands of a Brother, every day at lunchtime.
- a happily married mid-life mother and grandmother . . . struggling as an undergraduate university student with her science-class requirement . . . attending a pre-exam evening tutorial session . . . she’s the only one who shows up for the session, and so she spends an hour or so alone with her professor asking and answering questions . . . telling the teacher at the end of the session that she hopes she’ll remember the material as well the next day on the test . . . since she gets nervous and doesn’t test well . . . the professor tells her there’s no need to come tomorrow . . . she had just successfully demonstrated that she knew and understood the course material . . . she already passed the test.
- a successful political leader . . . whose determined mother took her underperforming son to visit a college about which she had heard good things from another mother on a nearby farm . . . an unannounced visit and a gracious welcome . . . the mother bringing his grades . . . the admissions counselor saying, “okay, you have one semester to prove yourself” . . . a providential meeting that was followed by eight successful semesters on the college’s honor roll.

Stories of Commitment and Calling

I am also mindful of so many stories that began in gratitude and evolved into deeper, lifelong commitments to association on behalf of the Lasallian educational mission.

- a young woman . . . who researches and finds a college that she thinks is “the right fit” for her . . . succeeding over the course of four years in her studies . . . becoming a student leader on the residential college campus . . . joining the Lasallian Volunteer movement, for a couple of years, immediately after graduation . . . then applying for a first full-time job in a Lasallian school . . . and then another one . . . and then another one . . . gradually moving from someone who has found meaning and purpose in Lasallian employment to someone who now helps guide, educate, and form others (teachers and students) associated in Lasallian mission.
- a very successful business leader . . . of a belief tradition other than Catholic . . . who had been raised by a single mother . . . now happily retired . . . enjoying the benefits of a long and very successful business career . . . committed to helping fund the education of poor youngsters from single-parent families at his own alma mater . . . while serving as a trustee of the institution . . . finding out about another smaller Lasallian school on a different continent . . . an educational center in Asia . . . where some poor youngsters get the necessary help to go to school . . . a true miracle for them . . . he first meets and then eventually tells the head of school . . . “if you have any of these folks from the slums for whom you cannot continue to cover the costs, especially if they are from single-parent families, do not turn them away . . . contact me, and I’ll provide for them.”
- a school principal in Africa . . . who felt so attracted to the Lasallian mission during his student years that he joined the Brothers . . . first as a teacher and then as a principal of a very successful school of about 400 students . . . a school which has in recent years expanded to welcome, on average, another 150 destitute street children into the school . . . this Brother annually makes fundraising trips to Europe and North America . . . where he provides other Lasallian former students and their friends the blessed opportunity to help fund the schooling, housing, feeding, and clothing of these street children who truly come from “beyond the borders” . . . who are among “the least, the last, and the lost” . . . the “spiritual patrimony” left to us by Saint John Baptist de La Salle.

As De La Salle told the first Brothers, “it is God that helps us . . . be pleasing to him in every way and produce good works of every sort.”⁵

For so many of us, it wasn’t only teachers and classmates and course content that we encountered as young students in Lasallian schools. Isn’t it the experience – *and this is my third point* – that we were drawn into a community and a story that has, over the years, “shed light on our identity, as well as our world”? We did not merely find a school . . . rather, the school’s mission and story found us . . . evoking in us “a sense of self” and a new way “of naming and framing life.”⁶

Isn't that why so many of us are still around today . . . in associations of Lasallian former students or working in Lasallian institutions . . . why so many of us work as Lasallian associates in or on behalf of the Lasallian mission . . . for the past 10 or 30 or 50 years?

Isn't this why we continue to walk side-by-side with the men and women "who identify themselves as the sons and daughters of John Baptist de La Salle" . . . accepting the call of the Spirit, as it were, to be among the Brothers and with the Brothers – and other committed Lasallian associates – "the heart, the memory, and the guarantor of the Lasallian charism"?⁷

Isn't this what has led us, by imperceptible design, to become increasingly more deeply associated in sustaining and perpetuating the Lasallian educational mission . . . which is itself an experience and a consequence of spiritually living as Lasallians.

Longstanding Objectives and Emerging Priorities

I am aware that the objectives of the UMAEL organization are:

- to defend and promote the freedom of education.
- to collaborate with and support Catholic institutions to carry out their mission and purpose without hindrance and according to Gospel values.
- to work toward making education available to as many young people as possible.

You know these objectives better than I do.

I could talk about some of the longstanding and emerging priorities of our "Lasallian Family":

- access to good education for everyone, especially the vulnerable . . . those living, as it were, "beyond the borders."
- education and advocacy for peace and justice.
- the defense and protection of the rights of the child.
- the care of God's creation . . . ecological citizenship.
- the plight of migrants and their families . . . the welcome of refugees and immigrants.

But other presenters and other occasions these days will treat these and other topics.

Threshold Moments on the Lasallian Journey

The Brother Superior General and the Institute have just recently published an important document entitled *Lasallian Formation for Mission: The Pilgrim's Handbook*.⁸ In it, they suggest that Lasallians (and groups of Lasallians) who want to deepen their Lasallian identity, spirituality, and association for mission consider five "threshold moments" that emerged during the earthly "pilgrimage of John Baptist de La Salle" . . . consider these thresholds as a pathway of growth in the Lasallian charism.

- *1st threshold* . . . from having no contact with to being a participant in a Lasallian ministry (the journey from outside to inside).
- *2nd threshold* . . . from being a participant to identifying oneself as Lasallian (the journey from me to us).
- *3rd threshold* . . . from a professional commitment to discovering one’s life purpose in the mission (the journey from commitment to calling).
- *4th threshold* . . . from being carried by the community to carrying the community (the journey from follower to leader).
- *5th threshold* . . . from institutional authority to the authority of wisdom (the journey from positional power to charismatic witness).

Do you hear your own story here? The journey from having no contact with to being a participant in a Lasallian ministry (the 1st threshold) . . . and . . . from being a participant (attending a Lasallian school) to identifying oneself as a Lasallian (the 2nd threshold).

Moving from a professional commitment to that of discovering one’s life purpose in the mission (the 3rd threshold) usually requires more time and some nurturing – *and this is the fourth of my five points* – nurturing our Lasallian spirit. What is it that initially awakened and nurtured the passion we have for this Lasallian Family and its mission? . . . What empowered and empowers us to continue on this journey, “together and by association,” for the good of the world . . . “walking side-by-side with the men and women who identify themselves as the sons and daughters of John Baptist de La Salle”?

Three Practices That Nourish Lasallians

Three practices (attitudes or habits) have identified and, I suggest, sustained – *and this is my final point* – Lasallians on the journey over the years . . . practices and disciplines that light up both the inner and the outer pathways of our Lasallian journeys . . . helping us both enter into and keep alive “the flame” that burned in the heart of the Founder . . . the gift of the Spirit we welcomed when we first started identifying as “Lasallians.”

The *first practice is presence* . . . presence is a Lasallian life-stance and a practice . . . I am speaking here about an attitude and a commitment to be personally – not just physically – present to those around us . . . not just to see the students but to know the students . . . not just to walk past the poor but to engage the poor . . . not just to be aware of God but to be willing to spend time with God . . . presence.

When Pope Francis was archbishop in Buenos Aires, he used to stop to chat with the poor in the streets . . . I remember seeing a family in a restaurant in Singapore . . . it seemed to be a husband and son who had taken his wife and mother out for brunch on Mother’s Day . . . and there he sat chatting with someone else on his mobile phone.

The habitual practice of the presence of God is certainly the context within which this life-stance emerged . . . De La Salle used to keep a small piece of paper to pierce as often as he recalled God present⁹ . . . his goal was “at least twenty times a day” . . . the first Brother teachers made it a “rule of the community not to enter the house or any room without directing our thoughts to

God” . . . and to “kneel to say a prayer” as soon as they entered the classroom¹⁰ . . . a deep respect and awareness of divinity waiting to be encountered in every time, every place, every person.

The *second practice is fraternity* . . . the life-stance of Lasallian fraternity is both an attitude and a practice . . . the providential choice made 300+ years ago to be called Brother instead of Master . . . Brothers to one another and older Brothers to those entrusted to our care . . . in these times, brothers and sisters to one another and older brothers and sisters to those entrusted to our care . . . not judging by appearance . . . seeing into the depths of our shared humanity . . . seeing beneath “the rags” of those we encounter in the classroom,¹¹ in our work and home places, and in the streets . . . embracing God’s plan for the human family since the beginning of time.¹²

I was reminded recently of a Vatican document entitled *Identity and Mission of the Religious Brother in the Church* . . . a document that states that our life-stance and practice of “fraternity” is part of the answer God is giving to a fractured world.¹³

In the current state of polarization and fragmentation in too many parts of the globe, people are hungry and hurting . . . and ours is a model of fraternity and belonging . . . providing a witness of a world in which brothers and sisters – not by birth but by choice – choose to educate and help others remember who we are all called to be.

The *third practice is interiority* . . . the attitude and practice of interiority was, according to De La Salle, to be looked upon as “the first and principal” of our daily activities¹⁴ . . . taking time every day to slow down . . . to center . . . to re-ground ourselves . . . to go to “the still point” . . . for some of us, this will be a kind of interior prayer¹⁵ . . . for many others today, it’s called mindfulness, meditation, openness to transcendence . . . The practice of yoga might help some . . . a quiet walk in the countryside or sitting peacefully beside a mountain brook works for others.

What I am speaking about is the habit of quiet and interiority . . . a deep listening to the heart that allows for self-discovery and promotes awareness of a “higher power” and a sense of purpose and inter-connectivity . . . Give yourself the gift of time . . . slow down . . . so that you might be better able to give others the gift of your best self.

In the seventeenth century, this practice was viewed as indispensable . . . “Today, most of us lead such busy, eventful lives that we do not make time for ourselves to enjoy being still. Most of us spend every waking moment in doing, perpetually moving and constantly striving for that which is just beyond us . . . We are not only continually doing, we are also constantly submerged in sound. Noise is everywhere.”¹⁶

The attitude and the practice of interiority . . . slowing down long enough and quietly enough . . . being still enough . . . that the “lovely power,” we call God, might “with wisdom and serenity,” gradually “transform us into its own loveliness.”¹⁷

Conclusion

And so, my friends, let's continue during our days together not just reflecting on the story of the man, John Baptist de La Salle, who we now call "Saint" . . . Let's use this time to reflect upon and celebrate our own Lasallian journeys . . . When De La Salle passed from this world into eternal life, those of us who, by God's grace, are his successors became the protagonists of this mission . . . This association for mission is what we are celebrating . . . one heart, one commitment, one life!

God bless you, and thank you.

Endnotes

1. These remarks were delivered on 21 November 2019 at the 7th Congress of the World Union of Lasallian Former Students (UMAEL), which was held in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The Congress, which coincided with the association's twenty-fifth anniversary, was entitled *Beyond the Borders: One Heart, One Commitment, One Life*.

2. Brother William Mann, FSC, who holds a Doctor of Ministry degree from Colgate Rochester Divinity School (1990), is president emeritus of Saint Mary's University of Minnesota. He is a former vicar general of the Brothers of the Christian Schools (2000-2007).

3. On November 21, 1691, John Baptist de La Salle, Nicolas Vuyart, and Gabriel Drolin made what is commonly called "the heroic vow." The three bound themselves by vow, which for many years was kept private among them, "to establish the Society, no matter what it might cost them, and even if all the others should abandon it." Cf. *The Work Is Yours: The Life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle* by Brother Luke Salm, FSC (Romeville, IL: Christian Brothers Publications, 1989), pages 75-76.

4. Cf. "The Memoir on the Beginnings: Text & Context" by Brother Gerard Rummery, FSC, in *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 8, issue 1 (2017), pages 27-63. [The four specific passages referenced in these remarks can be found on pages 31, 35, 37, and 37.].

5. *Meditation* #198.2 in *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*, translated by Brother Richard Arnandez, FSC, and Brother Augustine Loes, FSC, and edited by Brother Augustine Loes, FSC, and Brother Francis Huether, FSC, (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1994).

6. Cf. *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* by Parker J. Palmer (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998), page 25.

7. *The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (Rome: FSC Generalate, 2015), article 157.

8. Cf. *Lasallian Formation for Mission: The Pilgrim's Handbook* by Brother Jesús Rubio Nazer, FSC, et al. (Rome: FSC Generalate, 2019).

9. Cf. “The Rules I Have Imposed on Myself” in *Rule and Foundational Documents by John Baptist de La Salle*, translated and edited by Brother Augustine Loes, FSC, and Ronald Isetti (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications), pages 199-202.

10. Cf. *The Conduct of the Christian Schools* by John Baptist de La Salle, translated by F. de La Fontainerie and Brother Richard Arnandez, FSC, and edited by Brother William Mann, FSC (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1996), page 50.

11. Cf. *Meditation* #96.3.

12. Cf. *Mark* 12:28-31, *Romans* 8:28-29, and *Matthew* 23:8-12.

13. Cf. *Identity and Mission of the Religious Brother in the Church* by Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (Vatican, 2015), article 4 and article 6. [“The vocation of Brother is part of the answer that God gives to the absence of brotherhood which is wounding the world today. As the root of a Brother’s vocation lies a profound experience of solidarity”].

14. Cf. “Rule of 1705” in *Rule and Foundational Documents by John Baptist de La Salle*, chapter 4.1.

15. Cf. *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer by John Baptist de La Salle*, translated by Brother Richard Arnandez, FSC, and edited by Brother Donald Mouton, FSC, (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1995).

16. “The Gifts of Stillness” by Gertrud Keazor
[www.yobabalounge.com/blog/2016/11/4/the-gifts-of-stillness].

17. Cf. “Christian Spirituality in a Rapidly Changing World” by Cliff Knighten in *Crux: Taking the Catholic Pulse*, April 2, 2017.