
A Toolbox for Thinking About Vocations, Lasallian or Otherwise

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Understanding the distinctive Lasallian vocation within a theology of vocation is daunting, difficult, and dense. This essay provides a framework for thinking about the Lasallian vocation – a toolbox if you will – and looks at some of the pieces that are part of the conversation surrounding a theology of vocation.

We will start with two vocation catalyst stories, stories about how people have found themselves spurred to think seriously about their vocation in life. As you read them think about any similar kind of experience in your life, something seen or heard that made you reflect on your vocational journey. Doing so engages the vocational discernment process and may help the reader to develop insights into their own vocational journey.

Here is the first story. Nearly twenty years ago, I was in Chicago for a conference; and as I came to a street corner downtown, there was a parking lot across the street. It was surrounded on two sides by a tall, brick building. Cars stopping for the red light were sure to notice it. When my eye traveled up to the very top, there was a huge painted sign – large white letters against a jet-black background. It said: "If you're waiting for a sign from God, this is it." Underneath in smaller letters it said, "Consider the priesthood," along with a website address.

Here is the second one. A Religious Sister said that she seriously only considered her vocation rather later in life, when she was stuck behind a car at an intersection – also in Chicago, as it happened – and waiting for the light to change. Looking around, she noticed the bumper sticker on the car in front of her. The bumper sticker had three words on it. "Don't Die Wondering." That was what jarred her into seriously reflecting on her own life's trajectory and beginning to explore the movements of her heart.

These two experiences are not all that different from the experience of many who were "called" at some point in their lives, who through some person, experience or situation found themselves invited and drawn into the consideration of a life that they had not really imagined for themselves before. In this respect, the very "otherness" of some experiences – short as they may be – are the sort of interruption of one's life that demands attention. It's not a breakdown of things; it's a breaking in of something rather profound, something that plunges into the soul like a silent laser beam. As one author wrote, something like this "is transformative – if we are open to it. Our stories go on, but they go on changed."³

Each of us has a different story to tell about how we became involved in the Lasallian charism and ministry, and there is probably a very different story about why we're still in it. Every individual narrative is unique, personal, and if genuine, also dense, difficult, and daunting.

But how is it that theology might be helpful in understanding what vocation is all about, and how to go about discerning where our vocation could be found? In my reading of some of the literature on this topic, the primary thing that stands out is the fact that we're usually looking in the wrong direction when it comes to this "vocation" business, asking questions that arise out of our consumer culture ("I get to choose to be who I am") or out of a transactional religious perspective ("I will find my one vocation when it's given to me, when I'm ready for it") or out of a generally individualized, postmodern expectation of self-realization ("I have to express the self that I've constructed throughout my life"). All of these may be genuine expressions of vocational interest, but none of them are statements of genuine vocational discernment. This is where theology – the thinking about God and God's ways with us – may be helpful, because "how we think about things impacts how we do them."⁴

First, there will be some theological insights into the notion of vocation from Edward Hahnenberg, a lay theologian currently at John Carroll University and an articulate writer on the subject. He wrote both a comprehensive theology (*Awakening Vocation: A Theology of Call*) and a very accessible introduction into the faith that feeds our call, our vocation (*Theology for Ministry: An Introduction for Lay Ministers*). After the short summary of the theology about vocation, there will be a look at the vocation of John Baptist de La Salle, and how his story, his narrative, is informative to the kind of Lasallian themes that may also run in our contemporary stories, the vocation narratives of individuals today.

The word "vocation" originally and essentially meant a call, from the Latin *vocare*, which of course assumes someone who is called and a "caller" who does the calling. This sense of "call" has been around for at least as long as scripture has. In the Hebrew Scriptures, both the call of Moses and of Jeremiah stand out rather dramatically.⁵ In each case there is a definitive call, a commission, followed by an expressed hesitancy and subsequent assurance that is confirmed by a clear sign or verification. Their "call" happened in the midst of ordinary life and required a certain level of trust that God was indeed the one doing the calling. In other cases, such as with Deborah, who was called to be a prophet and judge in Israel, and Esther, who became an agent for saving her people from eradication, the same detailed steps for hearing and responding to their calls are missing from their biblical accounts, but simply the fact that their accounts are included in the writings of a patriarchal, male-dominated Jewish society gives substance to the reality of truly having being called that must have been in play. We just don't have the same details in their cases.

In the New Testament, being called or chosen or sent appears in many places. One scripture scholar writes that:

vocation refers to individuals whom God authorizes for a specific task and to groups who are gathered and groomed by God. The writers of the New Testament emphatically state that mortals should never presume to take honors for themselves (*Hebrews 5:4*), but are clients of a generous God who alone can ascribe such honors. The grace to "call" or "choose" is God's alone to bestow.⁶

[This is an important observation. A vocation isn't simply something you decide to do, and then you go do it. There has to be an invitation of some kind.] While the primary examples in the

New Testament had to do with “the fundamental call of Christ to discipleship and salvation,”⁷ Jesus himself also certainly had a call, a rather dramatic one, after he had gone with others to hear John the Baptist preaching. It involved deserts, devils, and decisions. Generally, a couple of important things stand out in the vocational calls that are found in the New Testament:

1. *No one in the New Testament volunteers*, deciding themselves that they have a call. And those who try to volunteer are dismissed, such as the person who wants to join, but Jesus tells him that even he has nowhere to lay his head, and the person first wants to go bury his father. Volunteering presumes a role or status that doesn't fit with true discipleship. Only God calls. Only Jesus invites his disciples to join him.
2. *The “call” cannot compel anyone to respond*. Think of the rich young man who was not ready to give up what he had, even after Jesus – in the words of the writer – “looked at him and loved him.” If you invite God's call and receive one, make sure that you're ready for the answer. It is invariably challenging, personal, and deep.
3. *Most of those called by Jesus in the Gospel are recruited by people who knew them already*. And once called, they are separated from their previous place, instructed by and about Jesus, and confirmed in responses or statements Jesus makes to them. So “vocation is initiated by persons who are already believers, who inform close associates about Jesus under some title and invite them to ‘Come and see.’”⁸ The call of a vocation is a very personal and relationship-oriented sort of thing. [In a more contemporary context, it is very interesting that the rapidly growing FOCUS movement – Fellowship of Catholic University Students – follows this exact pattern in its evangelization efforts, and quite successfully at that.]

Even the resurrection narratives are “call narratives,” ones that include an experience, a reaction followed by an assurance, a commission, and eventually roles in the Church. The dynamics of vocation, or a definitive context of being called, reverberate all through the New Testament narratives. An engaged vocational journey pervades scripture and its stories.

The patristic period saw radical calls and lifestyles introduced, especially among those who went into the desert to pursue lives of hardship, prayer, and focused attention to God. Most experienced the kind of call that only great commitment and interest can engender. It is important at this point to highlight that, for them and within their society's culture, there was no distinction between one's interior life and one's exterior life – no duality of perception or purpose. Belief and daily life were one thing, one reality, one experience. Vocation was life.

As the Church moved into the medieval period, the legal dimensions of religious life and any Christian life grew and expanded. And as canon law developed, permanent “states of life” became defined, with certain obligations attached to each. In the twelfth century, the nature of vows and the status of those who had vows, prompted by the rise of the mendicant Orders (Franciscans, Dominicans, etc.), led to a distinction between those who were in “secular” and those who were in “religious” states of life. And scholastic speculation, headed by Thomas Aquinas, added the categories of Aristotle into Christian thought. In terms of vocation, “for Thomas, the ‘states’ are those ways of Christian life within which the individual can realize the

‘particular perfection’ proper to each state.”⁹ This led to there now being two *calls*. “The external call predisposes the individual to hear Christ’s words; but that external call is not efficacious without an internal grace or call.”¹⁰ You could have one without the other, but you need both of them together in order to live out your proper vocation.

A few centuries later, things really started to get interesting, although it does get a little complicated on the theological level. It was really Martin Luther who first upset the apple cart when he, as part of his very vocal polemic against monasticism, not only emphasized that we are not saved by any of our own work, but only by the grace of God, but that as a consequence there were two separate parts to Christian living: God’s love is expressed by faith, and the love of neighbor is expressed by one’s vocation.¹¹ We stand before God by faith; we stand before our neighbor by works, by our vocation. As Hahnenberg writes “In the end, it was Luther’s distinction between the realm of heaven and the realm of earth that supported his thorough externalized theology of vocation.”¹² In a YouTube talk that he gave at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, Hahnenberg shows how his initial convictions developed into something quite the opposite:

For Luther, *every work* is a calling from God . . . As the concept of vocation passes from Luther, through John Calvin, to the English Puritans, you see a noticeable shift. Luther talked about vocation in terms of one’s state of life, one’s station in life. John Calvin emphasizes more the idea of productive labor. And the Puritans run crazy with this notion of work. With this, you get a shift in the Protestant tradition from thinking about vocation as faithfulness *within* one’s work, to faithfulness *through* one’s work, to faithfulness *to* one’s work. And the protestant work ethic is born . . . The great irony is that Luther’s attempt to highlight the sacredness of work leads to a secularization of the notion of vocation, and you get to a point where today in America you can quite comfortably talk about vocation – as in vocational counseling, vocational colleges, VOC-ED – without ever mentioning God.¹³

And so “the sacred and secular split apart and vocation landed on the side of the secular. Thus God became superfluous to a theory of vocation. The calling no longer needed a caller.”¹⁴ By the seventeenth century, work had become a religion all its own.¹⁵

Without surprise, given the historical context of the time, this led the Catholic Church in the Counter-Reformation to harden the notion of vocation to exclusively being called to be a priest or a vowed Religious. This is a notion that has persisted through to the present day, despite the major change of perspective introduced by the Second Vatican Council over fifty years ago, which will be looked at later in this essay.

First it is important to note that there were some hopeful developments during the centuries in between Luther and the twentieth century, and not least of these happened in the early part the seventeenth century, in France, about fifty years before Saint John Baptist de La Salle came onto the scene. Saint Francis de Sales, bishop of Geneva and a gifted preacher, writer, and spiritual director, had written two popular works that advocated what he called “devotion,” which was defined as “great ardor and readiness in performing charitable actions.” It was love burst into flame. His inclusive vision was grounded in “his unmistakable confidence in human nature as

redeemed.”¹⁶ For him, God’s love cannot be hemmed in. “It spills over, empowering a response in every way and walk of life.”¹⁷ Michael Buckley describes it this way: “The whole of the spirituality of Francis falls within . . . two movements: the surge that is the human being and the outpouring that is the divine providence.”¹⁸ Notice that these are two integrated movements, qualitatively different from the two defined and definable activities that we saw in Martin Luther’s “faith” and “works” or in the two *call* categories of Thomas Aquinas.

The theologian Louis Dupré provides a description of what lay behind the convictions of Francis de Sales, and it has to do with the relationship between nature and grace, a theological relationship that will be seen to be key to the entire discussion of a theology of vocation. He said that for Francis de Sales, “Grace transforms nature from within, resulting in a single reality that is both human and divine.”¹⁹

The other thing that happened in the seventeenth century, however, was not so very helpful. With the best of intentions and full of integrity, a Catholic philosopher introduced a whole new category of meaning.

Descartes’ reflection on his own interior life did not lead to a deeper sense of dependence on God, which he had hoped. Instead, his *Cogito* [“I know, therefore I am”] became the ground for a new self-sufficient certainty.²⁰

Hahnenberg summarizes the reverberations well, especially in terms of what happened with the relationship between nature and grace. He writes:

[T]he great irony is that Christian theologians of the late medieval and early modern periods actually helped to foster a split between the human subject and its transcendent source that would ultimately push God out of the world . . . Grace became reduced to a kind of “add-on” to creation, an extrinsic and transient force operating on an independent nature. Within this dualistic understanding of the nature-grace relationship, vocation suffered. For when grace becomes seen as a supernatural gift, an extrinsic power or divine energy transmitted to our soul, then one’s vocation becomes detached from one’s self . . . Once nature – that is, creation or the world – became an independent entity, a closed system functioning on its own and toward its own end, the order of grace could only be seen as a divine addition, an intrusion or supernatural “add-on” to the order of nature.²¹

Just as with what happened between faith and works in Luther’s case, or with the separate external and internal calls of Thomas Aquinas, nature and grace became more estranged from one another and less integrated. Why is that important? Because this led to the assumption that

the grace of vocation was an outside force touching the soul of an individual . . . A vocation became some “thing,” placed in an individual by God, but difficult to determine. Thus from the seventeenth century on, Catholic theologians writing on priestly formation all struggled with the same question: how do we know when someone *has* a vocation?²²

Despite the fine efforts in seventeenth-century France by Saint Francis de Sales, along with Cardinal de Bérulle and Jean-Jacques Olier from the French school of spirituality, to focus on the importance of the interior life for everyone, it wasn't until the Second Vatican Council that the vocation of the laity – of ordinary people – came to be front and center of what the Church is and should be about.

The Second Vatican Council document, *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, described the laity as

those who must strive after Christian sanctity for the glory of God in their own special way, including secular activity. Actively engaged in the concerns of this world, but led by the spirit of the Gospel, they courageously fight the evil of this world and even sanctify the world so to speak from within through their Christian calling.²³

Chapters 4 and 5 especially provide life-affirming, positive statements about the vocation of Christian life in the twentieth century, and these are very helpful in laying the foundations for the lay nature of our Lasallian vocation. They are eminently worth re-reading with this purpose in mind.

The *Exercises* of Saint Ignatius of Loyola also helped to advance vocational discernment, along with Karl Rahner's major insights describing God's infused presence within us and how that presence shapes how we are called. Hahnenberg's summarizes well how their perspectives influenced the way that we look at the nature of vocational discernment.

[V]ocation is not a detailed blueprint imposed on my life from above. It is not a hidden plan silently stored away; shared with some through a secret voice. Rather, my vocation is right there in front of me. It is me – *my life lived out in harmony with the gift of grace*, which is nothing other than God's loving presence within. Thus discernment is a process of reflecting on my fundamental identity before God. Each of us decides what to do by placing particular possibilities for life before this fundamental sense of ourselves, listening for either resonance or dissonance. Harmony between the two helps us know what we are called to do . . . According to Rahner, Ignatian discernment "works" because it recognizes that an authentic vocational choice can only be made when an individual is freed (by God's grace) from any particular attachment to the object of that choice and "has thus achieved openness to immediacy to God as the sole focus of his existence" . . . [W]e slowly come to see that the response we expect from God is the one that God answers through us – through our choices, our lives, our vocation.²⁴

When we come to know and rest in ourselves – in the presence of God known, aware, and engaged – and look at our life choices from that quiet place, God's call, God's vocation for us, is not the discovery of some hidden plan – some pseudo-mystical scavenger hunt²⁵ – but rather is found by following that profound resonance emerging between our deepest sense of ourselves before God and a particular path that lies before us.

And there is something more, although it is difficult to nail down.

Discerning a particular path in resonance with our deepest sense of ourselves before God may be confirmed, or validated, or solidified by what Ignatius called a “consolation without a preceding cause.”²⁶ If at that deepest part of yourself, aware and in touch with the transcendent, you contemplate a choice that brings what Ignatius calls “consolation” (peace, tranquility, clarity, balance, integration, etc.) for no discernible reason whatsoever, this pierces through any self-deception and the idolatry of ideas, and can only come from God. The reason for the “rightness” of the choice is completely unidentifiable, but irresistible. The concrete examples that come to mind are C. S. Lewis’s story of his conversion, or the growth of Dorothy Day’s and Thomas Merton’s vocations, or Rilke’s letter to a young artist telling him to live into the questions, or the transformation in the vocational journey of Oscar Romero, or Jonathan Sacks describing how he came to embrace his Jewish roots²⁷; and those are just some of the published ones. Each had never anticipated or planned for their eventual vocation; each was surprised by joy, as it were – which is the title of C. S. Lewis’s book about his road to Christianity. But you have to take the time, you have to make the effort, you have to do the boring bits. God only works in and through the real world, via real circumstances, events, and people. As Lasallians, we should know that from De La Salle’s own story.

To finish this section focusing on God’s encounter with us in both the depths and the details of our lives, here is an example of the sometimes surprising, strangely comprehensive, and almost unavoidably sudden experience of transcendence; an unanticipated encounter with deep grace, with God’s presence, that led to life-changing consequences. Anthony Bloom was born and raised in Russia but moved to Paris after the 1917 Russian revolution and became a surgeon in the French army and the French underground during WWII. This is what he wrote later in his life:

I met Christ as a Person at a moment when I needed him in order to live, and at a moment when I was not in search of him. I was found; I did not find him. I was a teenager then. Life had been difficult in the early years and now it had all of a sudden become easier. All the years when life had been hard I *had* found it natural, if not easy, to fight; but when life became easy and happy I was faced quite unexpectedly with a problem: I could not accept aimless happiness . . . Happiness seemed to be stale if it had no further meaning. As it often happens when you are young and when you act with passion, bent to possess either everything or nothing, I decided that I would give myself a year to see whether life had a meaning, and if I discovered it had none I would not live beyond the year.

Months passed and no meaning appeared on the horizon. One day, it was during Lent, and I was then a member of one of the Russian youth organizations in Paris, one of our leaders came up to me and said, “We have invited a priest to talk to us, come.” I answered with violent indignation that I would not. I had no use for Church. I did not believe in God. I did not want to waste any of my time. Then my leader explained to me that everyone who belonged to my group had reacted in exactly the same way, and if no one came we would all be put to shame because the priest had come and we would be disgraced if no one attended his talk. My leader was a wise man. He did not try to convince me that I should listen attentively to his words so that I might perhaps find truth in them: “Don’t listen,” he said. “I don’t care, but sit and be a physical presence.” That

much loyalty I was prepared to give to my youth organization, and that much indifference I was prepared to offer to God and to his minister. So I sat through the lecture, but it was with increasing indignation and distaste. The man who spoke to us, as I discovered later, was a great man, but I was then not capable of perceiving his greatness. I saw only a vision of Christ and of Christianity that was profoundly repulsive to me. When the lecture was over I hurried home in order to check the truth of what he had been saying. I asked my mother whether she had a book of the Gospel, because I wanted to know whether the Gospel would support the monstrous impression I had derived from this talk. I expected nothing good from my reading, so I counted the chapters of the four Gospels to be sure that I read the shortest, not to waste time unnecessarily. And thus it was the Gospel according to Saint Mark which I began to read.

I do not know how to tell you of what happened. I will put it quite simply and those of you who have gone through a similar experience will know what came to pass. While I was reading the beginning of Saint Mark's Gospel, before I reached the third chapter, I became aware of a presence. I saw nothing. I heard nothing. It was no hallucination. It was a simple certainty that the Lord was standing there and that I was in the presence of him whose life I had begun to read with such revulsion and such ill will.

This was my basic and essential meeting with the Lord. From then I knew that Christ did exist. I knew that he was *thou*, in other words that he was the Risen Christ.²⁸

Anthony Bloom subsequently joined the Russian Orthodox Church, became a priest, and eventually was archbishop of the Orthodox Church in Great Britain, becoming a compelling speaker and writer, especially among young people. To this day, his sermons remain a popular resource on a website created for the purpose.²⁹ The key to his conversion involved two integrated things: an interior movement brought on by circumstances, events, and people; and God's felt presence, the unanticipated but genuinely perceived touch of God's grace.

His vocational story is a good segue to the story of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, because I firmly believe that De La Salle's vocation journey, in fact, is also an example of someone who found his life radically changed by the providential guidance of God through events, circumstances, and other people, paying close and deliberate attention to both God and to his own inner spiritual journey, and then making real and practical choices on that basis.

Brother Gerard Rummery, FSC's video on the topic remains a classic.³⁰ He provides an overview of why he thinks De La Salle was such a great man and inspiration for so many others up to the present day. He says this about De La Salle's vocational journey:

I think he was a great man because he allowed himself to be led by events well beyond everything which his breeding, his education had led him to; where the scholar, the theologian . . . all those things would have led him to become a bishop. And yet he allowed himself to become involved with somebody who was interested in schools for poor boys. And somewhere in that meeting with the poor he found himself challenged, challenged in a very profound way; probably about his own life, his own wealth, his own level of society, and a certain sense that somebody ought to do something about this . . .

I think that openness of this man to read events as calls from God is probably one of the most striking things about him. And that in some way if he just done this himself, it would be one thing. But in some way he was able to inspire a small group of people to follow him.³¹

What the video highlights is the slowly transformative impact of God working through the events of your life – when you see each decision, each event as a call from God. In a very short period, one trajectory became an entirely different one for De La Salle. In fact the new trajectory was certainly not the one that he had anticipated, that he had wanted, or that even had any particular appeal to him. It was solely his conviction that God was calling him in that direction that made him get involved, one decision leading to another until he found himself doing something he had never foreseen for himself.

Here is a quick summary of some of those major decision points, which may be easily found in any modern biography of De La Salle³²:

- October 18, 1670: He starts at Saint Sulpice Seminary in Paris at the age of 19.
- July 19, 1671: His mother dies.
- April 9, 1672: His father dies, and he returns to Rheims to oversee his siblings, etc.
- June 24, 1672: A number of siblings move away, and he remains at the family home, overseeing the family's affairs and the education of his three younger brothers.
- April 9, 1678: He is ordained a priest at the cathedral of Rheims.
- April 17, 1678: His mentor and spiritual director, Father Nicholas Roland, dies, leaving him in charge of a group of Sisters involved with orphans and the education of girls.
- March 15, 1679: He meets Adrian Nyel, who invites him to help him start a school for poor boys in Rheims.
- April 15, 1679: With De La Salle's assistance, Nyel opens the first school, then another.
- Christmas 1679: Nyel's teachers move to a house rented by De La Salle, since they wouldn't survive without further help.
- Easter 1680: De La Salle invites the teachers to live at his house for a week of retreat, from morning to evening. He also receives his doctorate as a result of his ongoing studies.
- June 24, 1680: He invites Nyel and the teachers to have their daily meals at his house.
- Christmas 1680: He goes to Paris to consult with Father Barré, a respected Minim priest. Barré tells De La Salle that he should invite the teachers to live with him.
- April 2-9, 1681: He conducts another retreat for the teachers at his home.
- June 24, 1681: He brings teachers to live with him in his house. De La Salle's family is understandably upset, and they sue him for the house.
- June 24, 1682: Losing the lawsuit, De La Salle and the Brothers move to a rented house on Rue Nueve, a decidedly poorer part of town.
- July 30, 1682: The family home is sold and its assets distributed among the family.
- August 16, 1683: De La Salle resigns his lucrative, influential position as canon of the Rheims cathedral.

- Winter 1683: During a severe winter famine in the area, De La Salle distributes his wealth to the poor.

It is said that our vocational road straightens out behind us, that is it only by looking back over our lives that we gain insight into its larger trajectory. When De La Salle did so later in life, his self-reflection is a perfect example of Hahnenberg’s statement that

[W]e slowly come to see that the response we expect from God is the one that God answers through us – through our choices, our lives, our vocation.³³

This is what De La Salle wrote, reflecting back over his life thus far:

I had imagined that the care which I assumed of the schools and the masters would amount only to a marginal involvement committing me to no more than providing for the subsistence of the masters and assuring that they acquitted themselves of their tasks with piety and devotedness . . . 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 . . . Indeed, I experienced a great deal of unpleasantness when I first had them come to my house. This lasted two years. It was undoubtedly for this reason that God, who guides all things with wisdom and serenity, whose way it is not to force the inclinations of persons, willed to commit me entirely to the development of the schools. He 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.³⁴

The details of De La Salle’s life story – the decisions he made, the labors he took on, the challenges he faced – have shaped the charism that we all share, providing touch-points that continue to give life to how we do what we do in our institutions.

What are some of the key dimensions of De La Salle’s journey that situate our call as Lasallians in a broader context? Let me offer just three of them. You will find other points of alignment or resonance when you next read a biography of De La Salle – that’s part of your vocational journey.

1. *De La Salle was really stubborn* when it came to following what he thought was right, especially when it came to something he felt sure he had to do based on his religious convictions. The obvious example is bringing the teachers into his own house and living with them. But that’s only one dramatic illustration of a life-long commitment to this sort of integrity. The former chief editor of the monumental *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, Father André Rayez, became convinced that historians have not given De La Salle due credit for the innovations he introduced through the various courageous responses he made to situations as they arose. He writes, “That ‘unruffled boldness’ of the Founder’s can be explained in the last analysis, only by the spiritual quality and the genuine holiness of his life, for his only ambition was at all times and despite all obstacles to adhere, in a view of faith, to God’s will clearly known, and to the designs of Providence.”³⁵

2. *De La Salle listened well* and believed in paying attention to others and integrating their narratives, their input, their experiences, into the development of this educational movement and his own involvement in it. When he was first working with the early teachers, both as the group's leader and, at their request, the group's spiritual director, one of his biographers, who knew and lived with De La Salle, says that nothing was introduced by authority. Instead "he flattered them by giving them the satisfaction of being themselves the creators of their own vision and their own plans for making it a reality. In this way they became, in effect, their own legislators."³⁶ And toward the end of his life, in 1714, when the Brothers ordered him back to Paris from Grenoble, under the vow of obedience that he had taken with them some twenty years earlier, to take up the government of the Institute once more, despite his genuine reluctance to do so, he returned and did as he had been requested. The voice of the others was also the voice of God for him.

3. *For De La Salle, interiority, prayer, and the spiritual life was never an add-on* or an extra nice-to-have thing. These were essential, life-giving and action-shaping dimensions of all that he did and all that he expected of his teachers. Interiority, prayers, and the spiritual life was how the Lasallian charism was brought to life; it was how his unique *pedagogy of fraternity*³⁷ was shaped. The vocation of a teacher and the vocation of attaining salvation were not two different separated things. He writes, "Do not distinguish between the duties of your state and what pertains to your salvation and perfection. Rest assured that you will never effect your salvation more certainly and that you will never acquire greater perfection than by fulfilling well the duties of your state, provided you do so with a view to accomplishing the will of God."³⁸ Similarly, the *Rule* for the Brothers that De La Salle wrote with them includes this statement: "The Spirit of this Institute is first a Spirit of faith which should lead those who belong to it to *look upon* nothing except with the eyes of faith, to *do* nothing except in view of God and to *attribute* all to God . . . Secondly, the Spirit of this Institute consists in an ardent zeal for the instruction of children . . ." ³⁹ Later on he said that those who do not have this spirit should be considered "dead members." Pretty strong language! He really believed this.

Therefore, it is not a stretch to say that De La Salle's vocational journey emerged and evolved with just the kind of focused, deep attention to the movement of both his interior life and the needs of those around him that the theology of vocation talks about in contemporary times, even though his seventeenth-century language and perspective may have been expressed differently. And the fact that he was able to reflect in 1694 that he was led, one decision after another, to a place he had not anticipated, confirms a recognition of this as a "call," a "vocation," a movement of events and decisions that was cumulative, unpredicted, and highly formative.

In that respect, I think of De La Salle very positively in light of the conclusion that Hahnenberg offers about the theology of vocation:

Thus to discover my vocation is to hear a certain harmony between who I am as a child of God and how I live in the world, with and for others . . . [W]hat faith-filled people are saying when they say that they "have been called" to this or to that is not that they have

found some hidden plan but that they have felt a profound resonance between their deepest sense of themselves before God and a particular path forward . . . Instead of being called out of a sinful world, we are called into a suffering one. Instead of being called to some special state of life, we are called to the other in need . . . [D]iscernment demands nothing less than the long and difficult path of discipleship.⁴⁰

There is a closing story. It is a personal story, but it bears on the topic. The story is about a 10-minute conversation that I had in 2007 and that still sticks with me today because of its simple and profound insight into how a Gospel-based vocation perspective might be best facilitated for those young people who are entrusted to our care, and in an age of disaffiliation and Church suspicion. This story goes back to when I had been invited to help staff the General Chapter of the Brothers at the Motherhouse in Rome, five weeks of work preparing, overseeing and leading the prayer and liturgy experiences for the assembled delegates. At the time I was the Vocation Director for our District and had also taken on the role of Regional Director of Vocation Ministry, responsible for promoting the Brothers vocation in North America.

There were several invited speakers that I was able to listen to from the back of the assembly hall. One of them was the 80-year-old retired cardinal archbishop of Milan, Carlo Maria Martini, SJ, whose 22-year stint in that role had especially endeared him to young people. He knew them well, and they loved him well. In the middle of his two-hour talk to the Chapter delegates, he had to take a break, simply to rest in his room for a half hour. But I had a burning question for him, and I knew that if I didn't follow up and do something about it, I wouldn't be able to ask him later and would certainly regret it.

So I built up my courage, snuck down to his room, knocked on his door, and asked if he would have just a few minutes for me. He graciously invited me in, asked me to sit down, and was all attention. As it was, I didn't really know him or his background; but I was very impressed with what he had already said to the delegates, and something about his delivery had persuaded me to act. And so this is what I asked him. "Cardinal, I'm involved right now in vocation ministry with young people in the United States. What is the best thing that we can do to help young people find their vocation?"

He was silent for about two minutes, quietly thinking about the question – already a very impressive thing to me, because it meant that he took the question very seriously and would not respond with a prepared kind of answer. He was "in the moment," as they say, and clearly saw each moment of his day in a providential, God-filled light. Then he said, "Brother, two things. First, give them an experience of silence. And second, help them to open up scripture for themselves. The Holy Spirit will take care of the rest." I was silent myself for some time. Then I thanked him sincerely and left, touched by his words and by the convictions and sentiments behind those words, which have echoed in my mind ever since then. They still do.

Finally, a theology of vocation is only as good as the vocations that it informs, encourages, shapes, and develops. The real vocation journey is essentially a Gospel journey, a journey of faith, not simply a personal quest. Hahnenberg puts it well:

[T]he great good news of the Christian call is that following Jesus frees us . . . To live one's life as a response to God's call is a pilgrimage, a shared journey of faith, solidarity, and transformation in the light of Christ – the marks of a very different kind of quest.⁴¹

De La Salle's insight into the accompaniment of such vocational journeys, learned through long personal experience, is well represented in this statement to the Brothers, taken from his writings:

Be satisfied with what you can do, since this satisfies God, but do not spare yourself in what you can do with the help of grace. Be convinced that, provided you are willing, you can do more with the help of God's grace than you imagine.⁴²

Endnotes

1. These remarks were prepared for delivery in one of the breakout sessions at the Eighth Annual International Lasallian Research Symposium, which was held from 20 to 22 September 2019 on the Twin Cities Campus of Saint Mary's University of Minnesota.

2. Brother George Van Grieken, FSC, holds a PhD in religion and education from Boston College and currently serves as international secretary coordinator of Lasallian research and resources for the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

3. Edward P. Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation: A Theology of Christian Call* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), page 177.

4. Edward Hahnenberg: "A Wider Witness: From 'Lay Vocation' to the Call of Missionary Discipleship" YouTube video, 49:47, posted by "John S. Marten Program in Homiletics and Liturgics," October 16, 2015, <https://youtu.be/NGvJ-GvaADA> (14:26–50 for this clip).

5. These examples, along with the historical material that follows, are taken from Hahnenberg's book, *Awakening Vocation*.

6. Jerome Neyer SJ, *Call and Commission in the New Testament*. Accessed November 10, 2018. <https://nrvc.net/publication/4851/article/4357-call-and-commission-in-the-new-testament>.

7. Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, page 6.

8. Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, page 6.

9. Paul Holland, *Theology of Vocation through the Centuries*. Accessed November 10, 2018. <https://nrvc.net/publication/4851/article/4359-theology-of-vocation-through-the-centuries>.

10. Paul Holland.
11. Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, page 11.
12. Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, page 11.
13. *Dr. Edward P. Hahnenberg Speaks at Catholic Theological Union – Lecture 1*. YouTube video, 53:14, posted by “LearnatCTU,” September 27, 2013, <https://youtu.be/CvZW8IpP6JY> (26:20 – 27:42 for these clips).
14. *Dr. Edward P. Hahnenberg Speaks at Catholic Theological Union – Lecture 1*.
15. Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, page 22.
16. Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, page 30.
17. Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, page 31.
18. Michael J. Buckley, “Seventeenth-Century French Spirituality: Three Figures,” in *Christian Spirituality*, edited by Dupré and Saliers. Quoted in Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, page 40.
19. Louis Dupre, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993). Quoted in Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocations*, page 227.
20. Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, page 73.
21. Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, page 74.
22. Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, page 80.
23. Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, page 39.
24. Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, pages 226, 227, 228. At the same time, Vatican Council II’s perspective did not immediately result in a change of perspective on the part of the rest of the Church. “[M]any of the underlying assumptions remained in place. And today, Catholics continue to talk about vocation in ways that are both overly institutionalized and overly interiorized . . . We may challenge a theology of supernatural grace that reifies vocation or turns discernment into a pseudo-mystical scavenger hunt. However, within this history of institutionalization and the interiorization of vocation lie, waiting to be recovered, the resources for a broader and more holistic vision. In Francis de Sales’ inclusive view of holiness and his graced view of the person, in Ignatius of Loyola’s attention to experience and his appreciation for narrative, in Vatican Council II’s world-affirming spirituality and its sensitivity to history, we find the building blocks for a contemporary theology of call. In the last half century, Catholicism

has seen a revival, a renewal, even a revolution in its understanding of God and the human person, in its ecclesiology and its ethics, But the greatest theological transformation is the one that runs underneath all of these – a revolution in the theology of grace. If we are still struggling to talk about the breadth and depth of God’s call in ways that are intellectually cogent, spiritually meaningful, and pastorally relevant, it is because we have not yet thought through vocation in life of this grace revolution.” Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, 90.

25. Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, page 90.

26. Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, page 144.

27. Jonathan Sacks, *The Tablet*, 1 April, 2000, page 451.

28. <http://www.mitras.ru/eng>.

29. <http://www.mitras.ru/eng>.

30. <https://youtube/rmIOfmZ91G8>.

31. <https://youtube/rmIOfmZ91G8> (Time stamp 1:11 – 2:03 and 3:58 – 4:14).

32. Among recommended biographies are Brother Luke Salm’s *The Work is Yours* (Washington, DC: Christian Brothers Conference, 1999) and a shorter version by Brother George Van Grieken’s *The Teacher’s Saint* (Washington, DC: Christian Brothers Conference, 2019).

33. Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, page 228.

34. Jean-Baptiste Blain, *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle, Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools*, translated by Richard Arnandez FSC (Romeoville, IL: Christian Brothers Conference, 1983. Vol. 1, Bk. 1, pages 60-61.

35. André Rayez SJ, *Revue d’Ascétique et de Mystique*, 28 January-March (1952).

36. Quoted in Leon Aroz FSC, et al., *Beginnings: De La Salle and His Brothers*, translated by Luke Salm FSC (Romeoville, IL: Christian Brothers Conference, 1980), page 23.

37. Leon Lauraire FSC, “A Pedagogy of Fraternity” in *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 7, no. 3 (2016). Presentation at the FSC Casa Generalizia on May 12, 2015.

38. De La Salle, *Collection of Various Short Treatises*, translated by W. J. Battersby and edited by Daniel Burke (Romeoville, IL: Lasallian Publications, 1993), page 78.

39. John Baptist de La Salle, *The Rule of 1705: An English Translation*, translated by Eugene O’Gara (Moraga, CA: Buttimer Institute of Lasallian Studies, 1989), page 1.

40. Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, pages 231, 232. 233.

41. Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, page 233.

42. De La Salle, “Regarding the Use of Time” in *Collection of Various Short Treatises*, page 80, #10.