
Justice: A Characteristic of Lasallian Education

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"Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for justice."² This blessed passion for justice can and should characterize every aspect of a Lasallian school's culture, and when it does, the school community is transformed. When a living and dynamic tradition responds to a genuine human need, life and hope are born for the people of our world. The inclusion of justice education in all Lasallian schools and institutions of higher learning is the right response at the right time. The tradition inaugurated by Saint John Baptist de La Salle established service to the poor as a constituent element of the Lasallian charism. Education for justice grows out of this privileged ministry and is a completion of it.

The Lasallian concern for justice responds to the most basic of Catholic Christian beliefs and principles: a radical, unconditional respect for the dignity of every person, from the moment of conception to the moment of natural death. It was that same radical respect that led Saint John Baptist de La Salle to sell his property to feed the hungry and to make the education of the poor not only a priority, but a life's work, a ministry.

Catholic and especially Lasallian educators have always been tremendously successful teaching students to both value and live the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. Our students collect canned food for the hungry, or visit with and pray for the imprisoned and the sick, or adopt families during the Christmas season, or volunteer at soup kitchens, or tutor disadvantaged youngsters. In reality, however, doesn't an authentic respect for the dignity of the human person also require, and this is one definition of justice, changing relationships and social patterns characterized by dominance and oppression? Isn't human dignity often threatened not only by individuals who need a change of heart, but also by cultural, political and economic patterns which need transformation?

As this definition of justice suggests, and as Catholic Social Teaching maintains, an active respect for human dignity demands not only short term solutions to human needs – food, water, clothing, shelter for today, i.e., works of mercy. It also requires that in prophetic fashion the hard questions be asked, and long-term solutions be sought. Why are people hungry, naked, homeless, poor, jobless or under-paid, or marginalized? Our response to the Gospel proclamation that each and every human life is sacred most certainly requires that we who follow Jesus Christ engage in works of mercy. A full response also requires that we engage in social action, that we seek long-term social change, that social patterns characterized by dominance and oppression are transformed so they promote respect, equality, and even intercommunion. By addressing the root causes of suffering, such social action leads to change which can reduce the very need for works of mercy.

The whole school community can be regenerated by the pursuit of justice education. The community's prayer – morning, classroom, liturgical – no longer merely prays for the poor and

needy, but with them. The religious studies program plays a central role, helping students discover the Hebrew and Christian scripture's core themes of mercy and justice, and teaching the rich tradition of Catholic Social Teaching. But education for justice cannot be the responsibility of the religious studies department alone. Everywhere in the curriculum are opportunities to infuse justice education, in history and social studies courses, in language and cultural studies, and in drama and the arts, to name just a few. Justice can become a theme of retreats and days of recollection for faculty and students alike. And then there are the institution's financial decisions.

The passion for justice that Jesus so warmly praised in the Beatitudes³ must influence where the institution's monies are invested and the choice of merchants with which the school does business. Where are the school and athletic uniforms manufactured, and by whom? When a passion for justice and justice education infuses the life of the school community, the role of women and minorities within it receive a kind of attention that may be long overdue. And as opportunities to honor alumni present themselves, new criteria arise about who should be held up as role models, who should be honored, and why?

In the context of the Lasallian focus on formation of the whole person, justice education aids students in developing authentically Christ-like social consciences. It shapes their awareness of the world and society around them, and offers them role models who are both counter-cultural and authentically Christian. Students are challenged to respond rather than react to social issues. And hands-on experiences of works of mercy can become a bridge for them to ask the appropriate questions about social action.

Since it is so central to the Gospel, not an addendum but an integral component of Jesus' proclamation of the Reign of God, education for justice is a necessary component of all Catholic education, and all the more so for schools founded to carry on the Lasallian mission and charism. Indeed, Saint John Baptist de La Salle himself understood that education in itself is a long-term solution, at least for the individuals involved. The Founder knew the truth of the old maxim, "Give a person a fish and you feed her for a day; teach a person to fish, and you've fed her for a life-time." In the Catholic understanding of the term, justice stands on two feet: corporal and spiritual works of mercy on the one hand, and social action seeking structural change on the other. Each is unique, both are equally important and mutually complementary. This is a case of "both/and" and not "either/or."

Lasallians respond to the cry of the poor by their witness to the Gospel of Christ and their participation in the Institute and in the faith community. Education for justice is an affirmation of their witness to the prophetic Christ who came to liberate captives and bring good news to the afflicted. Service to the poor leads Lasallians through a human and Christian education to meet basic human needs in both short and long term. Education for justice builds solidarity with the poor in their struggle to overcome the forces that oppress them.

The prophetic and liberating power of the Gospel is at work in the lives of both teacher and student through their shared struggle to discover the ways of justice. In a world characterized by injustice, service to the poor invites the discovery of methods of acting that will help free the oppressed and the oppressor from the enslavement of injustice. Searching out the causes of poverty with the young or aiding them in an analysis of the systems that institutionalize the

poverty many endure is one expression of the zeal characteristic of the Lasallian educator. The mutual efforts of teacher with student to challenge the forces that perpetuate injustice join them in the shared mission to establish the Reign of God initiated by Christ, our Savior.

Justice begins for the Lasallian educator with prayer and reflection on how best to live passionately in the Lasallian tradition in the concrete circumstances of the students being taught. Saint John Baptist de La Salle reminds us that we are ambassadors of Christ. This sublime truth leads us to walk gently and humbly on our journey with the poor. Always we remember that we are sent to the poor to be evangelized by them. Our students are searching in many different ways and in various places for God. Our witness to the Gospel can help them to discover that the God who calls out to them is a God of justice. Without the awakening justice education provides, we may inadvertently support economic, cultural or political systems that oppress those to whom we are sent to teach. Our zeal to bring students to an awe of God may then lead our students to the conclusion that God is not on the side of the oppressed but of the oppressors!

The teacher-student relationship is for most Lasallians the primary way we witness to Gospel values. Before many of our students know who God is, before they know what it means to follow Christ, they know their teachers. The Incarnation is real for them because of the teacher who stands at their side.

Justice education encourages the teacher to enter more completely into the lives of those she/he teaches. It invites a sharing of stories and a revealing of struggles. Awareness of poverty and its causes can help the teacher to encourage students to bring their pain out of hiding. Pain that can paralyze, distract and enrage the young, can now be shared in a compassionate community. Through prayer, suffering may be transformed into a force for justice, into evidence that God's grace is greater than the evil of oppression, a sign of the Resurrection for those suffering injustice in their daily lives.

Many Lasallian educators are not solely and directly involved with the lives of the poor. Through justice education those involved with the education of the more fortunate have a unique opportunity to nurture in those students an acute sensitivity to the needs of the suffering, the oppressed and the marginalized. Any failure to present the Gospel message of justice and peace and the tenets of Catholic Social Teaching frankly and clearly could imply a Christian endorsement of oppression, could be interpreted as support for the status quo, for those individuals and social systems most responsible for withholding from the poor the means necessary for their full development in human dignity.

We are Lasallians because Saint John Baptist de La Salle's story is ours. In April of 1714, one significant episode of that story unfolded. Troubles in the schools in Paris led the Brother Directors and Principals to recall Saint John Baptist de La Salle to the city. Upon his arrival in August, Saint John Baptist de La Salle responded to the call. "Well, here I am. What are your wishes?" This is a response full of faith in God's holy presence, "Here I am." It is a response full of zeal and a readiness to respond to the real needs at hand, "What are your wishes?"

In a world that often doubts that truth can be known, and in a time when the poor long to find signs of God's holy presence while hungering for prophets of authentic justice and lasting peace,

the tradition of Saint John Baptist de La Salle is our guide. Education for justice – both works of mercy in service to the poor and social action leading to long-term change – are two expressions of our shared ministry. With the presence of Jesus in our hearts we can with confidence follow in the footsteps of Saint John Baptist de La Salle to respond with confidence, “Here I am. What are your wishes?”

Endnotes

1. Kevin Regan and Edward Sirois are Lasallian Partners who have served for many years as religion teachers at La Salle Academy in Providence, Rhode Island (USA). While Ed continues to teach at La Salle Academy, Kevin now serves as a counselor at another Lasallian school, The San Miguel School in Providence, Rhode Island (USA). This article originally appeared in *Bulletin 249: Educating in Justice* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2004), pages 12-14.

2. *Matthew* 5:6.

3. Cf. *Matthew* 5:1-12.