

The Lasallian Mission: A Way of Educating for Life for All

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Introductory Remarks

First of all, I want (a) to say that it's a real pleasure to be here with so many Lasallian friends and colleagues from all over the United States and Canada and (b) to say "thank you" to the organizers of the conference for the honor of being invited to come from Rome to address you about the deep story of inclusivity . . . the "wide embrace" . . . of our Lasallian educational mission.³

When I was a young Brother, we used to joke among ourselves about our District's Auxiliary Visitor,⁴ the only person we knew who would travel from New York to New Orleans by way of Seattle; and I found myself mindful of him . . . chuckling even . . . as I traveled from Rome to Chicago by way of visits to Thailand and the Philippines.

And so, on this trip . . . quite literally around the world . . . I found myself one day walking in a restricted and guarded residential community in Manila. There was broken glass on the top of eight-foot walls, and there were security guards in booths armed with machine guns. Only the well off, the known, the invited, the announced, gained access. Entrance was restricted to keep out those who were unknown, different, feared, mistrusted – unwelcome.

I recall similar "guarded communities" in so many places that I have visited . . . cities like Johannesburg, Nairobi, Bangalore . . . where those who are well off protect and isolate themselves from the squalor and the so-called "riff-raff" . . . from contact with the poor . . . a scene whose variation was well expressed by Jonathan Kozol's opening description of New York City in his book entitled *Amazing Grace*:

The Number 6 train from Manhattan to the South Bronx makes nine stops in the eighteen-minute ride between East 59th Street and Brook Avenue. When you enter the train, you are in the seventh richest congressional district in the [USA]. When you leave, you are in the poorest.⁵

The "haves" and the "have nots" often live side by side, but their worlds are separated by a cultural divide as wide as the Pacific Ocean that I crossed by airplane on my way here to be with you.

Two Worlds: One of Privilege and One of Misery

This line of thinking reminds me of a similar reality in seventeenth-century France . . . where the family . . . the upper bourgeois social class . . . the economic and cultural strata of society to which the young John Baptist de La Salle belonged . . . of which he was a precious, promising,

up-and-coming member . . . lived a reality disconnected from that of the social classes of the working class and the poor. His city of Rheims had, we might say, an invisible, but no less formidable, wall separating these two worlds . . . one of privilege and one of misery . . . a wall which protected the ascendant status and prerogatives of some . . . and locked out other social classes or categories of people. This social and cultural divide was the wall that De La Salle breached when he moved . . . from the Hôtel de la Cloche . . . “a large renaissance-style mansion situated in the heart of the commercial quarter of the city” . . . into the house he shared with the first schoolmasters in the Rue Neuve . . . “in the heart of the poor working-class area of [Rheims]”⁶ . . . the birthplace and cradle of the charitable and gratuitous schools we now know as the Christian Schools of John Baptist de La Salle.

The spanning of the chasm between these two worlds is both a Gospel imperative⁷ and a reality to which De La Salle often makes reference in his writings.

⇒ In *Meditation* #85, he writes of Joseph and the soon-to-be-mother Mary looking “for a house where they could stay [the Christmas Eve story], but nobody was willing to accept them, because they were occupied by people more wealthy, more distinguished than they . . . As they considered her only an ordinary person and the wife of a working man, there was no part of a shelter for her.”⁸

⇒ In *Meditation* #39, he focuses the Brother-teachers’ attention on the concern a mother⁹ . . . a humble Canaanite woman . . . who entreats Jesus to help her with her daughter . . . “this woman is doubly marginalized: a woman in a man’s world; a Gentile and hence unclean”¹⁰ . . . “The disciples entreat Jesus, ‘get rid of her’”¹¹ . . . Although perceived as an unworthy “outsider,” this mother will not take “no” for an answer . . . she glimpses in Jesus a capacity for compassion that is ever more inclusive.¹²

⇒ In *Meditation* #194, he writes of the children of the working class and the poor who are allowed “to live on their own, roaming all over like vagabonds . . . because [their parents’] poverty does not allow them to pay teachers, or else, obliged as they are to look for work outside the home, they have to abandon their children to fend for themselves.”¹³

De La Salle Inspires Us to Spend Our Lives in the Service of Others

When I think of the breaching of the walls dividing these two worlds, a painting by Giovanni Gagliardi that hangs in the Motherhouse of the Institute in Rome comes to mind. This painting – entitled *De La Salle Distributing Bread*¹⁴ – is, for me, a kind of icon, or visual metaphor, of the core of the Lasallian educational mission.

De La Salle stands at the door of his family house in Rheims in a time of famine (the extraordinarily harsh winter of 1684-1685). He stands at the portal that separates the “two social worlds,” as his biographer Jean-Baptiste Blain wrote, of “the children of quality who are rich, well born, refined, and amiable” and the children of the poor.¹⁵ He distributed his wealth as bread to the poor in the streets.¹⁶ A young boy to the right of De La Salle in the painting watches attentively. At the same time that his hunger is being satisfied, a lively curiosity is awakened. A young girl watches from behind a mother who is drawing the attention of an infant in her lap to

the selfless humanity of one who gives living expression to the words . . . “when I was hungry, you gave me food.”¹⁷

As we all well know, he not only shared of his economic resources . . . he spent a lifetime sharing his time, his talents, his social connections, his ecclesiastical status, his distinguished academic pedigree . . . making all he had, all he was, and all he would become available in the service of the many who had so much less. In the person of this man we know and revere as Founder, it was possible to reach out and touch Jesus, who holds nothing back for himself, as he reaches out to meet us.

And so it was that I found myself, on that walk in Manila, mindful of you and of the time we would be spending together today . . . considering our theme of making Lasallian ministries accessible to all . . . the “wide embrace” of our Lasallian educational mission . . . “a way of educating for life for all.”¹⁸ I found myself thinking of our worldwide network of Lasallian schools and child-care agencies in some eighty countries and embracing approximately nine hundred thousand students . . . keeping “the door” open and so making the vision and the Kingdom of God both visible and tangible in our times and for the students.

The Promise of Fullness of Life for All

The Lasallian educational mission is, after all, grounded in the vision of the Kingdom of God which, I suggest, finds its best expression for Lasallians in *John* 10:10 (“I came that they might have life and have it to the full”) and in its following verses in *John* 10:11-16 (“I am the Good Shepherd” . . . who goes in search of the lost . . . and the excluded). Our mission is lived out in fidelity to that glimpse or revelation of divinely-inspired gratuity in the life of John Baptist de La Salle and of the providential inspiration that impelled him “to commit himself with determination, if not to change the world, at least to change something in his world, to contribute to a breaking up of that infernal cycle of which the poor were the victims.”¹⁹

And so *the first question that I pose* is: how do we as Lasallian educators make visible and tangible “the fullness of life” Jesus promises and offers to all? The *Formula of Vows* of the Brothers says we accomplish this primarily in our commitment “to conduct, together and by association, schools for the service of the poor.”²⁰ The *Rule* of the Institute of the Brothers states that this is realized when we provide “a human and Christian education to the young, especially the poor.”²¹ In the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, De La Salle refers to this ministry as one of sacrificing ourselves and spending our “whole life to give these children a Christian education and to procure for them the life of grace in this world and eternal life in the next.”²²

For some . . . the poor and the working class . . . “fullness of life for all” might mean having the doors to a quality education opened . . . an education adapted to their capacity and needs . . . offered with reverence and respect . . . an education that allows the possibility of escaping that infernal cycle of depravation and failure in which their families are often trapped. For others . . . the more well-off students and even the teachers . . . “fullness of life for all” might mean having the opportunity to see reality differently . . . possibly having “blindness” taken off . . . having minds and hearts opened . . . to a common humanity with all God’s people . . . my brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ . . . and the consequent opportunity and responsibility we all have for one

another . . . “Fullness of life” for all . . . for young people . . . especially poor young people and youth at-risk . . . a world without walls and barriers that lock some out and lock others in.

The Call of the 43rd General Chapter

Our Lasallian mission inspires a global, inter-active, living educational network that is being called upon, in these days, to remain steadfast in its priorities and to become increasingly more creative, bold, and audacious in responding to the plight of those for whom the present social and educational systems are failing. As the 43rd General Chapter of the Brothers of the Christian Schools in 2000 stated, we want to prioritize our energies in these days on “thinking of ways to make [educational] centers accessible and effective for young people in difficulty” and “creating ways so that poor youth and their families feel welcome and at ease in our institutions.”²³

The 43rd General Chapter also calls Lasallians to be especially courageous and determined in responding to the plight of those experiencing what is now referred to as “new forms of poverty” . . . lacking love and affection at home . . . hungering for meaning and finding oneself adrift in a sea of moral relativity . . . feeling alienated from formal religious structures or affiliations . . . experiencing abuse or abandonment by supposedly trusted adults . . . being trapped within the self-perpetuating cycles of violence, substance abuse, or an insatiable desire to accumulate material goods at the expense of one’s own soul.²⁴

Embracing and Strengthening Our Communion for Mission

In the spirit of the 43rd General Chapter, we gather these days in Chicago to embrace and strengthen the communion of the network for mission and the bonds that exist between us and between the schools and ministries in which we work . . . We live in a multi-cultural, pluralistic, multi-religious reality that De La Salle could little have imagined . . . He was a man of his times . . . the seventeenth-century world of King Louis XIV . . . “one country . . . one king . . . one religion.”²⁵

And, yet, De La Salle does provide us both an inspiration and an impulse. There are glimpses or intuitions in the story of the origins to guide us today.

⇒ De La Salle was constantly engaged in the difficult job of finding the funds so that the poor could be educated and the livelihood of the teachers would be assured. So that schools would be sustainable, the support of benefactors was necessary; and the constant negotiation of contracts with Church and city officials was required.

⇒ For those working adolescents for whom the schools of De La Salle had arrived on the scene too late, the Sunday Schools were opened as an innovative response to their plight. The adaptation of the model for new populations was embraced without hesitation.

⇒ When merchant families in Rouen or sailor families in Marseilles desired that this kind of schooling be made available for their children, De La Salle again responded favorably. Some view this as the exception, but all of the schools of De La Salle were exceptional. This ministry with the children of merchant families was a work worthy in

and of itself; and the curriculum was adapted, once again, to meet local needs . . . without ever compromising the core principles and authenticity of the Lasallian enterprise.

⇒ When Rouen city officials proposed the care of delinquents at the house of Saint Yon, there was again another favorable response . . . a decision that had ramifications that ultimately led, over a disagreement concerning Sunday Mass for the boys in the house of detention, to the archbishop's suspending "De La Salle's faculties to exercise his priestly functions."²⁶

What Are Lasallians Doing Today?

But, the issue facing us today is – and this is *the second question that I pose* – “how do we intend . . . in the twenty-first century . . . to continue to make the network of Lasallian educational ministries accessible to all and assure their sustainability at the same time . . . and at what cost?” How do we play our part in the opening of that doorway that continues to separate these “two worlds” . . . locking some out . . . trapping others within? How do we contribute “as far as [we are] able” and as God and their plight requires²⁷ . . . to knocking down the wall . . . to overcoming the chasm . . . that divides and alienates so many in the family of the children of God and that continues to rob them of human dignity and “fullness of life”?

I have become aware of and have seen . . . in my travels around the Lasallian world . . . so many instances of that door being unlocked.

⇒ In Nakhonsawan, Thailand, there is a La Salle School of about seven thousand students, where two small residences have been opened and free tuition and boarding provided for poor rural students and for orphan students . . . and where a day-center has been opened for the young children of the families who live in the city “garbage dump.” Some say, “not enough”; but I say, “what a miracle.”

⇒ In Perpignan, France, there are Lasallians who travel every day in mobile classrooms making schooling possible for the children of the nomadic gypsy population.²⁸ Some say, “not enough”; but I say, “what a miracle.”

⇒ In Bacolod City, Philippines, the University of Saint La Salle has opened, under its sponsorship, a residential center that now houses eleven delinquent youngsters. At their “Bahay Pag-Asa Youth Center” (“House of Hope”), these boys have truly been given an opportunity to see their lives renewed and transformed . . . adolescents previously incarcerated with adult male prisoners . . . a project inspired, in part, by the Ocean Tides Educational and Residential Treatment Center in Rhode Island . . . and supported with significant funding by the Lasallian District of San Francisco. Some say, “not enough”; but I say, “what a miracle.”

⇒ In the Twin Cities of Minnesota, two Lasallian secondary schools²⁹ assist a third school³⁰ in providing a more-or-less free secondary education for graduates of the local San Miguel Middle School.³¹ Some say, “not enough”; but I say, “what a miracle.”

When I think of the wall being dismantled and the chasm overcome, so many Lasallian stories come to mind.

⇒ A graduate of an affluent Lasallian college preparatory school on the East Coast³² . . . who went to live and work with the poor in Guatemala . . . and then returned to the USA to help establish a Latino Family Outreach Program for poor, immigrant families and their children.³³

⇒ Another graduate of an affluent Lasallian school³⁴ . . . who spent one afternoon per week as a student in the religion department's Christian service program visiting severely disturbed adolescents at a psychiatric hospital . . . profoundly moved one afternoon when a young girl who had not spoken for months to anyone else began to open up to him . . . who now, as a psychiatrist himself, works with troubled and alienated adolescents . . . the experience as a youngster changing the direction of a life.

⇒ The graduates of numerous Lasallian secondary schools and universities . . . who now serve as trustees and regents and as benefactors and sponsors of Lasallian schools and universities . . . assuring for others access to the kind of education of which they were once blessed recipients.³⁵

⇒ The annual powerful witness and contribution of more than thirty university graduates³⁶ who serve for one to three years as Lasallian Volunteers in so many worthy Lasallian ministries on behalf of the poor all over this USA/Toronto Region.

Lasallian schools and ministries are, as you well know, inclusive and transformational; and these are just a few of the stories worth telling. Lasallian teachers and ministers are bridge builders committed to making a quality, faith-based education accessible to all. Together and by association, we inspire and form students to be brothers and sisters to one another as they work for and walk together into the Kingdom of God.

A Lasallian Education for Life for All

Yes, this is our commitment. We remain steadfast in our resolve to make good humanly Christian education³⁷ accessible for the excluded . . . but not just access . . . an access that prior to De La Salle left the poor too often excluded from or ignored in the classrooms of the Little Schools of seventeenth-century France . . . schools that had no connection to the reality of their needs. We Lasallians assure that they [the children of the working class and poor . . . and those on the margins] are sought out, included, cherished, respected, valued, given responsibility, prepared for work and for life. We welcome the whole of God's family, and especially the poor,³⁸ through our doors . . . and into a future of possibilities and away from the chains of poverty and alienation.

And, yet, we also educate and form youngsters from better-off families into a world grounded in a sense of inclusion, solidarity, and communion. The sometimes forgotten "miracle" of our Lasallian origins was the decision of the parents of "some means" in the seventeenth-century to have their children sitting side-by-side on the school benches with the poor children of Paris . . .

a shock to the normal order of things . . . that led to condemnations and court cases . . . the raids and attempted destruction of De La Salle's schools. A "miracle" not so unlike that shift of De La Salle himself from the bourgeois mentality of the Hôtel de la Cloche to that of our predecessors who lived on the Rue Neuve.

Concluding Remarks

As I come to the conclusion of these remarks, I would like to share one more story.

It is the story of a young boy . . . poor . . . not fashionably dressed . . . in worn and tattered clothes . . . a fairly religious young boy who might even be called a little pious . . . who was forced by difficult family circumstances beyond their control to wear tattered, hand-me-down clothes, who didn't have the newest or best gadgets, the condition of whose house was a bit embarrassing . . . a boy who was being mocked and taunted by his not-too-kind companions . . . who said to him . . . "In your poor state, it's clear that God must have forgotten about you." The boy paused, and with tear-stained cheeks he replied . . . "I don't think God forgot about me [and my family] . . . I think he probably asked someone to take care of [us], and they forgot."³⁹

We Lasallians, my brothers and sisters, believe that God raised up Saint John Baptist de La Salle and his followers so that no child would ever have cause to fear that God had forgotten them . . . so that no parent or guardian would sense that they are alone in the care and instruction of their children.⁴⁰ This story of the young boy provides, for me, a way of our remembering . . . in these days . . . the dream of the origins to which we strive to remain faithful.

May your time here at the Huether Lasallian Conference support and sustain you in your efforts to make our ministries accessible, sustainable, and welcoming to all. I know this is a great challenge. I know, also, that it is a glorious opportunity . . . the dignity of the human family . . . and the well-being of so many youngsters . . . depend on it . . . this holy work of God.

God bless you . . . God bless your work . . . God bless your networking these days together . . . Thank you.

Endnotes

1. These remarks, which were revised for publication, were delivered as the keynote address at the Huether Lasallian Conference in Chicago, Illinois, on 21 November 2003.

2. Brother William Mann, who holds a Doctor of Ministry degree from Colgate Rochester Divinity School (1990), serves as the president of Saint Mary's University of Minnesota since 2008 and as the president of the International Association of Lasallian Universities (IALU) since 2015. He is a former vicar general of the Brothers of the Christian Schools (2000-2007).

3. This keynote address was followed by the presentation of three young professionals who had graduated from Lasallian schools of the USA/Toronto Region: an African-American from New York who was working in the financial investment industry, a Latina from California who

was working in the higher education industry, and a European-American from Pennsylvania who was working in the accountancy industry.

4. Brother William Mueller was the Auxiliary Visitor of the District of Long Island-New England of the Brothers of the Christian Schools from 1973 to 1976. In the late 1960s, he had been our community director and theology teacher at the De La Salle Scholasticate in Washington, DC.

5. Jonathan Kozol, *Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation* (New York: Crown, 1995), page 3.

6. Cf. Alfred Calcutt's *De La Salle: A City Saint and the Liberation of the Poor through Education* (Oxford: De La Salle Publications, 1993), pages 13 and 130.

7. For example: *Matthew* 25:31-46 (the final judgment); *Mark* 10:21-22 (the rich man); *Luke* 4:16-21 (the rejection at Nazareth), 6:20-23 (the sermon on the plain), 14:12-14 (the guests invited to the banquet), 16:19-25 (the parable of the rich young man and Lazarus).

8. *Meditations* #85.1. "How long has Jesus been knocking at the door of your hearts?" De La Salle asked the first Brother-teachers. For how long has he been knocking at school doors . . . these children of the artisans and the poor for whom no welcome was found in seventeenth-century France . . . as they were considered unimportant and of little consequence?

9. *Meditation* #38.2.

10. *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Hills, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1990), page 658.

11. Cf. *Matthew* #38.2.

12. In *Meditations* #36, De La Salle also focuses attention on the plight of a father . . . desperate for help . . . at wit's end . . . without any other clear recourse . . . "Lord, take pity on my son, who is demented and in a serious condition" . . . "Bring him to me" is Jesus' response. Cf. *Matthew* 17:14-21 and *Mark* 9:14-29. According to the *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Hills, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1990), the reference here is probably to epilepsy (page 660).

13. *Meditations* #194.1. And he goes on to write, "God has had the goodness to remedy so great a misfortune by the establishment of the Christian Schools."

14. *De La Salle Distributing Bread* (1901) [cf. iconographie photo #17 of 41 at www.lasalle.oeg/en/galeria-de-imagines].

15. Cf. Michel Sauvage's "The Gospel Journey of John Baptist de La Salle" in *Spirituality in the Time of John Baptist de La Salle*, edited by Robert C. Berger (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1999), page 240.

16. Cf. Alfred Calcutt's *De La Salle: A City Saint and the Liberation of the Poor through Education* (Oxford: De La Salle Publications, 1993), pages 173-175. "He provided first for the children – some 2,000 in the Brothers' schools and those run by Roland's Sisters. He also was aware of some bourgeois families who were ruined by the high prices yet too ashamed to beg. He provided for them discretely. For beggars in the street, he organized a daily hand-out in the Brothers' dining room."

17. *Matthew* 25:35.

18. An expression taken from Thomas Groome's book entitled *Educating for Life: A Spiritual Vision for Every Teacher and Parent* (Allen, TX: Thomas More, 1998).

19. Cf. Michel Sauvage's "The Gospel Journey of John Baptist de La Salle" in *Spirituality in the Time of John Baptist de La Salle*, edited by Robert C. Berger (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1999), pages 240-241.

20. *Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (Rome, 1987), article #25.

21. *Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (Rome, 1987), article #3.

22. *Meditations* #201.3. It is "a great gift of God, this grace he has given to you to be entrusted with the instruction of children, to announce the Gospel to them and to bring them up in the spirit of religion" . . . this ministry that should be carried out "in love and a sincere and true zeal, accepting with much patience the difficulties you have to suffer, willing to be despised by others and to be persecuted, even to give your life for Jesus in the fulfillment of your ministry" (*Meditation* #201.1).

23. Cf. *Circular 447: The Documents of the 43rd General Chapter* (Rome, 2000), page 18. And, as we all know, access requires structures of support; and welcome requires genuine hospitality.

24. Cf. *Circular 447: The Documents of the 43rd General Chapter* (Rome, 2000), page 22; and *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* (Congregation of Catholic Education, 1998), page 43. It is important to note that the 43rd General Chapter in 2000 did not perceive the need to re-define the whole of the Lasallian educational mission. Brother Superior and the General Council had just published a document (three years previously) entitled *The Lasallian Mission of Human and Christian Education: A Shared Mission* (Rome, 1997). Instead, the capitulants gathered in Rome focused on two priorities for the inter-dependent network of Lasallian ministries during these seven years (2000 to 2007): (a) associated for the educational service of the poor and protection of the rights of the child and (b) evangelization [understood as the explicit proclamation of and formation in faith and inter-religious dialogue].

25. However much we wish, De La Salle will not provide us with answers to many of the challenges of the twenty-first century.

26. Cf. Luke Salm's *The Work is Yours: The Life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle* (Romeoville, IL: Christian Brothers Publications, 1989), pages 194-195.

27. Cf. "Formula of Vows" in *Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (Rome, 1987), article #25. See, also, *Meditation #86.3* (The Nativity of Jesus Christ): "Nothing draws souls to God more strongly than the poor and humble condition of those who wish to lead them to him . . . But if you do not resemble the newborn Jesus by these two outstanding qualities, you will be little known and little employed, nor will you be loved or appreciated by the poor. You will never have for them the role of savior that is proper for you in your work, because you will draw them to God only insofar as you resemble them and Jesus at his birth."

28. Cf. Claire Guérin-Lesueur's *When School Comes to the Children*, MEL Bulletin #3 (Rome, 2003).

29. Cretin-Derham Hall in Saint Paul, Minnesota; and Totino-Grace in Fridley, Minnesota.

30. DeLaSalle High School in Minneapolis, Minnesota, was, by reason of location and ethnic population, the preferred school of the youngsters and their families.

31. San Miguel Middle School in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

32. Christian Brothers Academy in Lincroft, New Jersey.

33. Tides Family Services in Rhode Island.

34. La Salle Military Academy in Oakdale, New York.

35. A special word of appreciation for the invaluable work and significant contribution of Board members . . . and an expression of gratitude to administrators of Lasallian secondary schools and universities who share their talented alums with the Boards of so many of our newer ministries on behalf of the education of the poor.

36. Many Lasallian Volunteers come from Christian Brothers University in Memphis, La Salle University in Philadelphia, Lewis University in Romeoville, Manhattan College in New York City, Saint Mary's College in Moraga, and Saint Mary's University in Winona; and countless numbers of them are also graduates of the Lasallian secondary schools of the USA/Toronto Region.

37. Might we also say in these days "Christianly human?"

38. Do not forget the "new forms of poverty."

39. Cf. John Fullenbach, SVD, *Throw Fire* (Manila: Logos Publications, 1998), page 88.

40. “Thank God, who has had the goodness to employ you to procure such an advantage for children,” *Meditations* #194.1.