

Mary as Model in the Work of Salvation of Souls in John Baptist de La Salle's Meditations and Lasallian Documents

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1. Introduction

The Institute of Brothers of the Christian Schools ("Institute") had the ultimate endeavor of laboring for the Reign of God in the world. The Institute's life is anchored on two essential values: acquiring the spirit of faith and developing zeal for the salvation of souls. These two values give meaning to their existence as lay consecrated men entrusted with the Christian education of the young.²

The Institute's Founder, Saint John Baptist de La Salle, exhorts the members, through his meditations, that the ultimate purpose of the establishment of the Institute was to bring about God's Reign in the lives of students by providing them with human and Christian instruction that will allow them to live life to the fullest.³

In order to bring the Good News to students, the Founder reminds his sons that they have been called by Christ to be his apostles to youth with a particular mission to proclaim the Gospel through the Christian schools that have been established with the singular goal of salvation.⁴ To carry out this mission, he admonishes his sons to primarily ensure that they acquire the Spirit of Faith by employing various ways of nurturing a personal relationship with God. He further emphasizes that each member has his duty to bring Christ to his students as a manifestation of one's zeal for the salvation of souls. However, far from making the work of salvation an individual endeavor, the Founder meditates on the importance of contributing to God's Reign through the genuine witness of fraternal relations among and beyond the members of the Institute.⁵

a. Mary as Model in the Life of De La Salle and the Brothers

John Baptist de La Salle emphasized the role of the members of the Institute as apostles sent by Christ on an educational mission.⁶ He further states that for one to be effective in the work of educational ministry for the salvation of souls, one must develop a personal relationship with God, have selfless zeal for the mission, and be united with one's fellow Brothers in carrying out the educational service to the poor.

To this end, De La Salle provides a model for the Brothers to follow. In his meditations, he points the Brothers to the life and example of Mary as a model of faith, a model of zeal for service, and a model of unity in the mission, among many others.⁷ He ultimately refers to Mary as a model of the Brothers' consecration to God which overflows with joy manifested through their selfless dedication for the mission given by Christ to the Church and through the Institute, which De La Salle and the Brothers eventually entrusted to the Virgin Mary.⁸

De La Salle's early biographers attribute many of his meditations to his devotion to and love for Mary, exalting her as a model for the Brothers of a genuine life consecrated to God which is manifested in an ardent zeal for the ministry of education, the Institute's contribution to the work of salvation.⁹

b. Scope of the Paper

The paper seeks to exhibit the role of Mary in the meditations of John Baptist de La Salle and in some Lasallian documents of the Institute. It particularly focuses on De La Salle's emphasis on the importance of developing the spirit of faith, an ardent zeal for service, and the unity among those who work in the mission. It aims to bring to light the various ways that De La Salle refers to Mary as a model for the Brothers to follow in carrying out their mission as apostles of Christ.

The paper also seeks to present how present day Lasallian religious educators can apply the Lasallian values of faith, service, and communion in mission in their work. Further, it hopes to develop in Lasallians a deeper appreciation of their teaching profession as a contribution to the work of salvation by bringing to light the Good News of Jesus Christ in the life of the young people entrusted to their care, particularly those who are most in need.

2. Mary in the Writings of John Baptist de La Salle

a. Model of Faith

In the beginning was the plan to carry out the work of salvation of all through the person of Jesus of Nazareth, who was born of Mary, Model of Faith.

The Church throughout history has established the role of Mary in God's work of salvation.¹⁰ In her life of faithfulness to the Father as seen in the Annunciation, one sees Mary as a model of trust and confidence in God's will. Through her faithfulness, she is able to proclaim that God fulfills all that has been promised.¹¹

Mary's faith in God is seen through her free and personal assent to God's invitation.¹² In her assent, one observes the response of her cognitive faculty to God's messenger, and her immediate loving response of self-surrender to God's will.¹³ Her faith, then, was seen in the physical manifestation of God through the person of Jesus of Nazareth. By her obedience to the Father, she is able to contribute to making God's indwelling real and tangible for humanity.

Through the story of the Annunciation, one sees how Mary's life is a model of faith, particularly through her free response to the mission that God has given her. It is by her cooperative disposition with God's grace, that she is able to carry out the duties and responsibilities as the bearer of God's Son. Through her faith and relationship with God, she is able to recognize the messenger, dwell on the message, and act on the mission.

In De La Salle's meditation for the Annunciation, he emphasizes the grace-filled response of Mary, then proceeds to emphasize God's plan of salvation, and ends with an exhortation for the Brothers to look into what each can do to contribute, just like Mary, to the salvific plan of God.¹⁴

De La Salle further reflects that God

gave her a heart so filled with God's love that she lived only for God. Everything in her related to God alone; her mind was occupied only with God and with what God helped her to know that would be pleasing to him. All the faculties of her soul had no other function except to give homage to God.¹⁵

This reference is clearly seen in the "*Rule of 1705*" of the Brothers, where De La Salle writes that

The Spirit of this Institute is, first, a spirit of faith, which ought to induce those who compose it not to look upon anything but with the eyes of faith, not to do anything but in view of God, and to attribute everything to God.¹⁶

After this part of the *Rule*, De La Salle proceeds with specific actions that one can do to live according to the Spirit of the Institute. The *Rule* mentions that: first, the Brothers must have a "profound respect for Scripture," reflecting Mary's obedience to the Word; second, "pass no day without reading and reflecting" on a part of the New Testament, reflecting Mary's pondering of God's Word in her heart¹⁷; and third, that each member must, in performing their action, "have in view the orders and will of God," reflecting Mary's assent to God by saying "I am the Lord's servant, may your Word to me be fulfilled."¹⁸

b. Mary, Model of Zeal for Service

In the beginning was the plan to carry out the work of salvation of all through the person of Jesus of Nazareth, who was born of Mary, Model of Zeal for Service.

In the birth of Jesus, Mary models for those who are sent by Christ that faithfulness bears fruit in service. Anchored on her faith in God, she is able to give herself to the mission of bringing to human existence, the Son of God.

Even before Mary gave birth to Jesus, her life of faith points to the larger mission of bringing Christ's love to those whom she meets. In the infancy narratives, after she receives the Annunciation from the angel, she goes and visits her cousin Elizabeth who had John the Baptist in her womb, whom she felt leaping for joy at the arrival of the baby Jesus.¹⁹ Further, we see Mary's mission of bringing Christ to the world by looking at the simple manger where she gives birth to the Messiah, and where the shepherds are able to recognize him as such, representing how the mission of bringing Christ's salvation has the poor and marginalized as its primary preference.²⁰

In De La Salle's meditation on the Nativity of Jesus, he first points out the poverty of the stable, where Mary bears the Savior "in a place where she finds no comfort or any human help and where there is no other bed for this newborn Child than a manger."²¹

De La Salle uses the poverty of the manger to emphasize God's preferential option for the poor and to exhort his Brothers to see how their life of poverty bears witness to the love of God for the poor, and how the poor are able to recognize God in the life of the Brothers.²²

Lastly, De La Salle demands that his Brothers remember that they can reflect and bring Jesus to their students only in as far as they themselves resemble the humility and poverty of Jesus in the manger.²³

These reflections of the Founder point to his emphasis on bearing the presence of God in the Brothers' ministerial duties in the school. He reflects that it is in abiding in God's love that the Brothers would be able to bring Christ to their students. Echoing Mary's example of prayer, work in God's salvation, and her pious upbringing and instruction of Jesus, De La Salle articulates in the *Rule of 1705* the need for

prayer, instruction, and their vigilance and good conduct in school to procure the salvation of the children confided to them, bringing them up in piety and in a truly Christian spirit, that is, according to the rules and maxims of the Gospel.²⁴

De La Salle further exhorts the Brothers about their ministerial duty to be ambassadors of Christ in the world,²⁵ by teaching the students the maxims of the Gospel,²⁶ and by acting as their guardian angels.²⁷ These duties echo the role of Mary in caring for Christ, and her role as a bearer of Christ in the world, making the mysteries of God more accessible to all, most especially to the poor and downtrodden, the primary recipients of the Christian education that De La Salle demands his Brothers to administer with zeal.

c. Mary, Model of Unity

In the beginning was the plan to carry out the work of salvation of all through the person of Jesus of Nazareth, who was born of Mary, Model of Unity.

At Pentecost, Mary models for those who have been called as apostles that it is essential that one binds oneself to a community of faith for the interest of contributing to God's work of salvation. In the Pentecost narrative, she is able to model the importance of keeping a community that is centered on Christ, if the community hopes to bear Christ to the world.

The Pentecost story illustrates the role of Mary in the life of the apostles and in the mission entrusted by Christ. Through her love and care for the apostles, they are able to continue the commandment of Christ to make disciples of all nations.²⁸ Mary's guidance and stability in the mission as the perfect disciple exemplifies the need for unity if the apostles desire to carry out the work entrusted to them.²⁹ The Heart of Mary, then, is a source of apostolic inspiration because of her love for God, love for Jesus, and her openness to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit which binds all missionary work to Godself.³⁰

Echoing the life and example of Mary, Saint John Baptist de La Salle deems the unity of the apostles in his Institute as an essential element in contributing to God's mission of salvation of souls through education. He sees each Brother as a source of this unity, just like Mary, by his way of support, obedience, and stability in the community and in the ministry.³¹ De La Salle finds it necessary for all Brothers to be united in one mind and heart, just like Mary and the apostles at Pentecost, if it is their desire to run the schools well and to fulfill the duties of their state as Apostles of Christ.³²

De La Salle's devotion to Mary and his insistence on having her as an essential figure in the life of the Brothers are seen in numerous events in the life of the Institute. Two notable events are as follows.

Echoing the Pentecost experience, De La Salle and the principal Brothers, at a time of crisis in the Institute, gathered in Rheims to discuss matters pertaining to the survival of the group. After discussions, they decided to take vows of obedience to the Institute for three years and a day after made a pilgrimage to the sanctuary of Notre Dame de Liesse to consecrate their life and work to her maternal care, even declaring Mary as the principal patroness and protector of the struggling Institute.³³

The Christian Schools of De La Salle and the early Brothers found themselves in deep crisis once again in the year 1691. This was a time when several Brothers either died or left the Institute and De La Salle and the remaining Brothers found themselves in a situation that seemed to be similar to when they first began. On the feastday of the Presentation of Mary, November 21, De La Salle and two other Brothers professed a perpetual vow of obedience, a sign of their life-long commitment to the survival of the Institute and its ministry. The event was eventually coined the "Heroic Vow" because of the admirable courage and steadfastness of De La Salle and these Brothers in surrendering themselves to God's work, through the intercession of Mary, amidst the uncertain future they faced.³⁴

3. Conclusion and Practical Applications Today

The life of John Baptist de La Salle and the early Brothers is a life wholly dedicated to God's work of salvation through the educational ministry to the young, especially the poor. The consecration of the Brothers is anchored on one's life of faith, apostolic service, and unity among fellow ministers of education. Through De La Salle's meditations and exhortations, the Brothers find inspiration in Mary, the patroness and protector of the Institute, whom De La Salle considers as the model of consecration and dedication to the apostolic ministry.

Today, the educational ministry entrusted to the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools is shared with countless Lasallian religious educators, both lay and consecrated. Through De La Salle's meditations and other Lasallian documents, educators find inspiration in Mary as a model of consecration and apostolic ministry which they too can emulate in their lives.

Through the example of the Virgin Mary, the meditations of John Baptist de La Salle, and some Lasallian documents, educators may hopefully appreciate the value of their profession as their contribution to God's work of salvation.

As ministers of religious instruction, it is important for educators to nurture a life of faith. Just like Mary's faith in the Annunciation, each educator is called for a specific mission in the Church. To this extent, John Baptist de La Salle identifies one's faith as the fuel of one's zeal for the mission. In nurturing one's faith, educators live in similarity with Mary who, through her faith and obedience to God's will, was favored to bring Christ to the world, especially to the poor.

As religious educators, it is important to look at the work of education as bearing Christ to the world with preferential option to those who are far from Christ. In doing this, the educator performs a similar role like Mary who brought Christ to the world, particularly to the shepherds who represent those who are poor and marginalized. As educators who wish to contribute to the work of salvation, De La Salle articulates that bearing Christ is possible by educating one's students in the Gospel. Today, this would demand the educator's dedication to study, learn, and simplify the lessons for the easier understanding of students. Then, De La Salle further gives weight to the role of the educator as an ambassador of Christ and as guardian angels to those entrusted to one's care. Today, educators ought to take good care of their students, and look out for their holistic wellbeing. This may mean being able to touch the hearts of one's students and lead them to conversion, primarily by reflecting the values of the Gospel in the life of the educator.

Lastly, it is important that religious educators are able to be united for the mission of Lasallian education. A model of this unity would be Mary's union with the apostles on Pentecost. Through her faith and zeal for the mission, Mary is able to inspire the apostles to continue the work of preaching the Good News to all the earth. Similarly, De La Salle echoes the Pentecost experience with his Brothers and entrusts the Institute to the protection of Mary, exhorting the Brothers to be one in mind and heart if they wish to carry out the mission of human and Christian education in the schools. Today, educators may contribute to this unity by their willingness to nurture a deeper spirituality as a community, and by collaborating and innovating new ways to teach the Gospel to young people. By fostering their common spirit of faith and accompanying each other in developing an ardent zeal for the educational ministry, educators are able to be united for the mission, which is carried out "together and by association"³⁵ for the salvation of souls, through education.

Endnotes

1. Brother Luis Angelo Enriquez received a bachelor's degree in psychology from De La Salle University in Manila and is currently pursuing a master of arts degree in theological studies with a concentration in systematic theology in Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines.

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14. *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*, translated by Richard Arnandez FSC and Augustine Loes FSC and edited by Augustine Loes FSC and Francis Huether FSC (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1994), #112.
15. Ibid., #163.2.
16. “Rule of 1705” in *Rule and Foundational Documents by John Baptist de La Salle*, translated and edited by Augustine Loes FSC and Ronald Isetti (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 2002), chapter 2, #2, pages 16-17.
17. *Luke* 2:19 NABRE (New American Bible Revise Edition).
18. *Luke* 1:38 NABRE.
19. *Luke* 1:29-42 NABRE.

20. *Luke 2:16-20* NABRE.
21. *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*, #86.1.
22. Ibid., #86.2.
23. Ibid., #86.3.
24. “Rule of 1705” in *Rule and Foundational Documents by John Baptist de La Salle*, chapter 2, #10, page 19.
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31. *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*, #39.3.
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34. José-Luis Hermosilla FSC, “Marian Devotion.”
35. Hernando Seba Lopez FSC, “Together and by Association.”