

Our Enduring Lasallian Heritage

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"And whoever receives one child such as this in my name receives me"
(Mt 18:5).

1. Story about a Poor Child

I want to begin my remarks by telling you a story that I heard a few years ago about a youngster, 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, a boy who didn't have the newest or best gadgets and the condition of whose home was a bit embarrassing.

Some of the other youngsters, his not-too-kind companions, were one day mocking him for his poverty. They were taunting him by saying that even though he was so obviously religious that God, from the looks of things, had obviously forgotten him and forgotten about his family.

The youngster stood there silently taking the hurt in; and after a few moments, with tears rolling down his cheeks, he looked at those bullying him and said, "I don't believe that God forgot me. I think God probably asked somebody to help me and to help my family, and they forgot. They just haven't gotten around to it yet."

2. The Lasallian Dream

Now I share this story because, for me, it cuts to the heart of why Saint John Baptist de La Salle founded the De La Salle Christian Brothers and why Lasallian schools and universities continue to exist all around the world. We were founded upon the conviction that no youngster and no family – no matter how economically, affectively, intellectually, or spiritually challenged – should ever believe that they have been forgotten or should ever have to wonder whether or not they've been passed over by God or by the rest of us.

This was the dream, or vision, that impelled John Baptist de La Salle in 1678 to assist the Sisters of the Infant Child Jesus,² a group of laywomen in his hometown of Rheims in France who were struggling to care for orphaned and destitute young girls, and in 1679-1680, with a group of laymen in that same city (our first Brothers),³ to found schools for marginalized, forgotten about, and passed over boys of poor and working class families. This was a dream that seized De La Salle's entire imagination and impelled him to put his first-class education and significant family, ecclesial, and social connections at the disposal of those less fortunate than himself.

De La Salle understood that God desires full human flourishing,⁴ but he also understood that "God couldn't truly desire this without providing the means for it and, therefore," he told the first Brother

teachers, “without giving the young teachers who will assist them in the fulfillment of God’s plan.”⁵

He understood that the gifts, talents, skills, and abilities we have were not given to us to be selfishly hoarded. We’ve been blessed, he taught us, so that we might share – lavishly, gloriously, and gratuitously⁶ – with others less fortunate. He helped us understand that the

Word of God does not fall out of the sky in an abstract way on anonymous individuals. Rather, it is in the person of another that people encounter the living God.⁷

This vision of a renewed world⁸ led De La Salle – during the freezing winter and horrific drought of 1684-1685 – to become one with the poor by giving away the entirety of his considerable wealth as food for the hungry.

He provided first for the children – some 2,000 in the Brothers’ schools and those run by the 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 handout from the Brothers’ kitchen.⁹

For De La Salle, it was not enough that young people had merely heard about God. He wanted the young to have the opportunity to meet some people who actually know and love God as a living being¹⁰ and who are faithful, courageous, and bold enough – in their own lives and in the world of education – to put that love into action on behalf of the least, the last, and the lost.

3. Our Enduring Lasallian Heritage

This is our Lasallian heritage . . . something that the descendants and disciples of De La Salle have been attempting – and have been doing – for some 340 years.

- And this is why in 1808,¹¹ the schools of the Brothers for poor and working class boys were the very first of the congregational schools re-opened by the French government after the Revolution, what is sometimes called the Reign of Terror, during which the 1,000 Brothers in France went into hiding as a number of us were killed; and the Catholic Church has now recognized four of these Brothers as saints and martyrs.

- And this is why in 1990, during what the United Nations declared the International Year of Literacy, the Brothers of the Christian Schools and the worldwide Lasallian educational network was awarded UNESCO’s *Noma Literacy Prize*¹² for the singular contribution we have made in eradicating illiteracy around the globe.

- And this is why earlier this week, a group of Manhattan College students and one of their teachers helped carry furniture and prepare an apartment in nearby Yonkers for a family of recently displaced refugees from Afghanistan so that when the parents and their 5 young children arrived yesterday on American soil they were welcomed into a warm and inviting place they could call home, enjoyed the experience of inclusion, respect, and

solidarity (all hallmarks of our heritage), and knew that they are not alone or forgotten by God or by the rest of us.

This is who Lasallians are – some of us for a period of time and some of us for the rest of our lives – teaching minds, touching hearts, and transforming lives grounded in De La Salle’s vision that in and through the world of education we give expression to the heart, face, and hands of a living God for the good of the world.

Endnotes

1. Brother William Mann, who prepared these remarks for delivery at Manhattan College on 7 April 2022, earned his doctorate at Colgate Rochester Divinity School. He is president emeritus of Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota, a former vicar general of the Brothers of the Christian Schools (2000-2007), and the immediate past president of the International Association of La Salle Universities (IALU).

2. Cf. Alfred Calcutt FSC, *De La Salle: A City Saint and the Liberation of the Poor through Education* (Oxford: De La Salle Publications, 1993), pages 81-95.

3. Cf. Alfred Calcutt FSC, pages 127-151.

4. Cf. *Meditations of John Baptist de La Salle* (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1994), #193.2, #194.1, #196.3, and #199.3.

5. Cf. *Meditations of John Baptist de La Salle*, #193.3.

6. Cf. *Meditations of John Baptist de La Salle*, #194.1, #196.3, #201.3, #206.1, and #207.2.

7. Cf. *The Brothers of the Christian Schools: A Declaration* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1967), #40.5.

8. Cf. *Psalm* 104:30.

9. Cf. Alfred Calcutt FSC, page 171.

10. Cf. *The Brothers of the Christian Schools: A Declaration*, #11.4.

11. Cf. Henri Bedel FSC, *An Introduction to the History of the Institute: The 19th Century 1805-1875* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2006), pages 24-28.

12. Cf. Gerard Rummery FSC, *Creativity: The Hallmark of Lasallian Education* (Washington, DC: Christian Brothers Conference, 2011), pages 27-30.