

## **Living through Paradox by Living in the Presence**

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In the days between completing final exams and graduation from high school, seniors come back to campus to practice for the big day. On one such day, a former student came by to chat. We reminisced about his junior year when he took the Christian morality and justice course I taught. He was a top student, and I still remember his daily attentive gaze and quality essays. On this day, though, it was something he said that I haven't forgotten. He pointed to the mobile cart of Bibles and remarked, "I can't remember us using them much." I made to counter but then realized he was right. I was speechless. What we did do is engage with a lot of content: books, biographies, prayers, essays, articles, films, music. But Scripture, the word of God—the font of moral and just living? Um, no, not so much.

### **Conversion**

It was a Damascus-moment. I was thrown for a loss. My former student had become my present teacher, and I was now able to see catechesis and evangelization in the blinding light of my new teacher's words. From that hour, I was changed and my approach to religious education changed. Even today I ask myself how I could have been so inconsistent, even hypocritical. After all, my spiritual life was nothing if not a daily encounter with Scripture. My prayer, spiritual reading, and study were grounded in Holy Scripture. My evangelizing ministry though? I felt entangled in an anxiety of my own making. Fortunately, Lasallian spirituality did, and does, offer a way through inconsistency and toward integrity.

Ron Rolheiser, OMI, has noted that inconsistency and paradox are perennial features in the Church. Even Jesus, he observes, was inconsistent in word and action, though he held seeming contradictions in a creative tension. The more I thought about the way Jesus held "together a number of important truths in a higher synthesis,"<sup>2</sup> the more I could see that John Baptist de La Salle did the same. It is a source of some solace to belong in this company, to realize that paradox and evangelizing are somehow linked. And then to see that their lives are calls to "go and do likewise,"<sup>3</sup> to work with the "creative tension" inherent in evangelizing ministry.

To begin, I'll explain what creative tension looks like in the Church and what it looked like in the life of Jesus. Then I will draw on De La Salle's spiritual vision and practices, his ways of holding his important truths in creative tension. Since I have practiced a ministerial spirituality rooted in his life and witness, I'll describe how it has offered me a holy path for holding inconsistent beliefs and actions in creative tension in hopes of reaching something resembling a life-giving synthesis.

## **Ecclesial Tension**

As Pope Leo XIV assumes his commission, he inherits the moving, dynamic flow of a global Church. Some view the Church as divided, pulled in contrary directions and close to schism. Another view is that the Church is in tension and has been since Peter and Paul faced off, that most ecclesial tensions are perennial. For instance, there is a perennial conflict and injustice in owner-laborer relations that demands a perennial response from the Church—the resulting intra- and extra-church tension is not new. For this reason, we can legitimately anticipate a *Rerum Novarum* 2.0, an update of the breakthrough original encyclical letter of Pope Leo XIII in 1891.

A shortlist of other ecclesial tensions illustrates the point. The theological and academic will always be in tension with the devotional. The “Who am I to judge?” approach to sexuality will always be in tension with holding people accountable to the Church’s moral teachings. In Church leadership, the missionary impulse will always be in tension with the imperative of maintaining continuity. Similarly, creative openness to the world is in tension with an exacting fidelity to tradition.

From its inception the Church has been buffeted by the tension between the kenotic and the triumphant Christ, between low and high Christology. In youth religious education and spiritual formation, there is a tension between catechizing or evangelizing as the starting point. Finally, there is a perennial tension between fidelity to the magisterium and fidelity to conscience.

## **Evangelical Paradox**

Jesus’s life and teachings are not a seamless garment. It isn’t just that the evangelists draw different portraits. It isn’t just that the parables are open to divergent interpretations. It’s that he doesn’t fit neatly on any ideological or theological spectrum; he controverts conventional thinking, let alone conventional wisdom.

Blessed are the persecuted? Love my enemies? Accept persecution and injury? Lose my life and I will save it?<sup>4</sup> Jesus’s teachings are paradoxical, often counter-intuitive and counter-cultural. As for his life, the mystery of his incarnation extends beyond his birth, or even his human growth into divine manhood. It is an invitation to see him present in every person: in the stranger, the homeless, the prisoner, in the one beaten and robbed, left to die.<sup>5</sup>

The key to coming to terms with these paradoxes, Rolheiser suggests, is to recall that Jesus “held important truths together in creative tension and, as a consequence, was misunderstood by just about everyone,” for his “teachings are more ‘both/and’ than ‘either/or.’”<sup>6</sup> Since following Jesus means to enter into the evangelical paradoxes personally, it means, as Saint Paul says, to “let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.”<sup>7</sup>

## **Mystical Realism**

There is an unmistakable “both/and” tone in De La Salle’s Christ-centered spirituality. His vision is prophetic in its insistence to enter the world of the poor and excluded while also insisting on

fidelity to the pope and the Church. He is continually open to what is new, even if it unsettles him, while also seeking a life of regularity and stability.

His sense of the transcendence and immanence of God is striking: his prayer is marked by awe and adoration of the ineffable alongside a heightened attention to the indwelling Presence in the here and now. In his writings, he strikes notes that are mystical and those that are moralizing,<sup>8</sup> but there is a notable synthesis of the mystical and the realist in De La Salle.<sup>9</sup> He nurtures a radical hope in the divine promises, but never overlooks the dispiriting reality of social systemic injustice and the need to counter with evangelical zeal “to procure for them the life of grace in this world and eternal life in the next.”<sup>10</sup>

De La Salle’s spirituality is a consciousness, a way of approaching life that is open to the seeming irreconcilable. His and the community’s spiritual practices bore the fruit of a living synthesis of life’s internal and external inconsistencies. For me, its authenticity lies in its responsiveness to the everyday and the inconsistencies that are part and parcel of life and ministry. It is at home with paradox and tension precisely because it is at home with mystery. This is the inestimable gift I’ve received in a spirituality of mystical realism.

## **Fidelity**

I trace the origins of my awareness of this gift to my freshman year in high school. I couldn’t have known it then, but I was being inculcated with a spirituality that would point my compass true north. At fourteen, I thought consistency was good, inconsistency not so good. I didn’t know that the life I wanted to live was going to draw me into the mystery at the heart of life; I didn’t know that mystery welcomes inconsistency, paradox, and tension. Over the course of a lifetime, Lasallian spirituality has provided a map for welcoming the mystery at the heart of life.

In the 13<sup>th</sup> Meditation for the Time of Retreat, De La Salle writes, “Come to know yourself just as you are.”<sup>11</sup> A realistic look at oneself is foundational. The practice of the examen helps me disentangle myself from false self-images and stay in touch with the “real me.” The examen is a reflection on personal events, an examination in order to detect and discern God’s presence. It has its origins in Saint Ignatius’s *Spiritual Exercises* and was integrated by De La Salle into the daily prayer of the primitive community. For many, the ideal is to pray this daily, but I find that hard to work into my schedule. So I make time on Saturday to review my week and recall how the Spirit has been present and to discern the prompts and inspirations.

It’s hard work. Bringing the week into consciousness is a break in the levee. But in the (over)flow of memories I can sense patterns, signs, and movements. I ask, What is God calling out of me? What is God sending me toward? I occasionally use the Ignatian examen, but I rely on an examen I created that is rooted in De La Salle’s reference to “fidelity to grace.” This, along with “divine inspiration,” is frequently found in the letters and meditations. Here is the flow of a “fidelity to grace examen”:

1. Centering: Remember the presence of Jesus and listen to him in the depths of my heart.<sup>12</sup>
2. Revisiting: What happened this week? How did the Spirit move in my life?

3. Recalling: What inspirations broke into life? What graces did I receive?<sup>13</sup>
4. Resolving: How can I—how will I—respond to these inspirations and graces?<sup>14</sup>
5. Concluding: “Come, Holy Spirit, take possession of my heart,  
and so guide my actions that I may be able to say  
that they are the work of your hands  
rather than mine,  
and that my whole being, in all its functions,  
is entirely dependent on your good pleasure.  
Blessed are they who no longer live or act  
but by the Spirit of God.  
Then truly will I be able to say,  
“It is no longer I who live, but it is Jesus Christ,  
or rather, His Holy Spirit, who lives in me.”<sup>15</sup>

The spirit of the examen continues through the week as I notice inspirations and graces. I ask, What is the intent of this prompt from the Spirit? What are you calling me to, Jesus? It’s less an orientation to “accomplishing God’s will,” which seems to me to have a fixed end (about which even holy people can disagree), than an openness to possibility and opportunity. The Spirit provides the inspiration and grace and I provide the response and fidelity.

To be clear, grace is not all sweetness and light. De La Salle emphasized cooperating with grace, so the practice is an ongoing lesson in freedom and detachment. Fidelity to grace means being open to the unknown, to mystery, and ultimately what the unknown will “do” to me, as in upset my equilibrium, undermine my favorite certainties, interrupt my plans. Yet, life and ministry are dynamic, and so I hunger for a spirituality that is dialogical and relational.

### **Attention**

A second Lasallian spiritual practice that I have personalized to help me in my ministry is attention. It has its origins in “simple attention,” the contemplative stance in *oraison*, Lasallian interior prayer. Ongoing attention, or what De La Salle calls the spirit of recollection, is the intentional sustaining of one’s relationship and encounter with the Spirit of Jesus during the course of the day. Key to remaining attentive to the Spirit—between formal prayers—is monitoring my diet, that is, the words, images, and stories that vie for my attention.

In my view, the more I “consume” these stimuli the more I am “consumed.”<sup>16</sup> So much of these stimuli are economic and transactional. That the human person is a target of profit-making interests is not new; the commodification and objectification of people has a long history. What is new is that the profit-making world’s words, images, and stories are everywhere. I direct my attention to Psalm 139, “Behind and before they encircle me,” and even when I turn away, they are there.

Lasallian spirituality’s healthy suspicion for the artificial and transactional is exemplified in De La Salle’s last will and testament. To be clear, for the better part of my life I found the following to be anachronistic. I now acknowledge that it has something vital to say to me in my own century. To the Brothers, he wrote, “Never have any familiar dealings with people of the world.

Little by little you will acquire a liking for their way of acting and will be drawn into conversation with them, so that through politeness, you will not avoid agreeing with their language, however pernicious it may be.”<sup>17</sup>

Concourse and discourse with people of the world is risky business if it means being drawn into “their language,” particularly if this language is driven by a profit motive that in the end dehumanizes us and desacralizes our world. For centuries the Brothers have integrated into their daily ministry ways of maintaining their laser-focus on God and the young people God has entrusted to them. Adapted ways are available to all who want their focus to be similarly unwavering. Given that I live in a profit-driven society and have something of a target on my back, I surround myself with three things that “keep my attention on God and the people with whom I have been entrusted”: words, images, and stories.

### ***Words***

I strive to surround my mind and my heart with words that are sacred, intimate, and enduring. I choose art and literature that shape my imagination and keep me attentive to the indwelling presence of the risen Jesus. I read a good bit, so I want words that keep my attention fixed on the reason for my (our) hope. That is, I need to remember the fundamental and enduring reality of God’s love. I need to be reminded. I need to stay anchored. I tend to be hyperconscious about what screens I spend time in front of, about the ads and apps that can be an undertow.

The sacred and intimate words of Scripture, particularly at the beginning and end of the day, are anchors. These words, expressive of the deep and true story of who I am and who we are, reach me in my depths. In unexpected and unplanned ways, they make their way into my consciousness and conversation. As my ministry is largely about communication, these words point me to the sacred dignity of each person and the story of God’s abiding presence in each of us in the here and now, our source of “grace in this world and eternal life in the next.”

### ***Images***

I surround myself in the home and office with religious art: icons, crucifixes, framed quotations. Is it kind of “churchy”? Yes. Artistically zealous? To be sure. And so the point is? To keep my eyes fixed on Jesus and the gospel of God’s grace.<sup>18</sup> In my view, my imagination is at stake here. I want my imagination to be freed for how I can live the gospel. The Jesuit General Congregation in 2008 stated that Jesus is the “unique image of the unseen God, capable of revealing himself everywhere; and in a tantalizing culture of images, he is the single image that unites us.”<sup>19</sup> The social environment is saturated with images, so I limit (inconsistently to be sure) the quantity and quality. It’s part of the slow work of being “transformed by the renewal of my mind.”<sup>20</sup> I want my mind to be the mind of Jesus, and so I fix my attention on his singular image.

### ***Stories***

Words and images tell stories, so a third practice is liturgical prayer. I treasure the story of God’s presence brought to life in the daily readings of the liturgy, the thematic richness of the liturgical seasons, the rhythm of the liturgical year. The Eucharistic liturgy was central to the spirituality

De La Salle prepared for the Brothers and their students. His insistence upon regular reception of communion, running hard against the Jansenist grain, is just one example of his insistence that liturgical prayer be participative.

I happened to have grown up during the liturgical renewal in the 1960s, which emphasized active participation. Being in tune with the liturgical calendar has always been a part of my life. Lectionary readings and reflections on the lives of the Lasallian saints and blessed forms one side of a participative dialogue with the people and events of my daily ministry. I have a sense that what is happening now has not only happened before but that we belong together in the story of the paschal mystery.

## Enchantment

De La Salle made retreats with the discalced Carmelites and he had a special devotion to Teresa of Ávila, whose works were available in translation by 1601. John of the Cross's works were available by 1695. The specific articulation of a "practice of the presence of God" by the Carmelite lay Brother Lawrence (Laurent de la Résurrection, d. 1691) carries resonances in Lasallian writings. Given that De La Salle made retreats at his Carmelite monastery, located on the Rue de Vaugirard in Paris, he would have had occasion to meet him.<sup>21</sup> Since Lawrence spoke of John of the Cross as his "spiritual father," his articulation of simple attention is undeniably influenced by John. In a letter written by Lawrence (contextual evidence dates it to 1682-1683), he states,

I gave up all devotions and prayers that are not required, and I focus only on being always in God's holy presence. I keep myself there by simple attentiveness and a general loving awareness of God.<sup>22</sup>

Key to Lawrence is this mutuality of "attentiveness" and "loving." The same affective nature of this loving attention permeates Lasallian interior prayer, of which De La Salle writes,

[Simple attention] consists in keeping ourselves, while considering the mystery, in an attitude of deep interior respect by a simple interior view of lively and respectful faith, which leads the mind and heart to a sentiment of silent adoration, of love, of admiration, of gratitude and thanksgiving, of self-abasement, and of a desire of the heart to unite ourselves with our Lord in this mystery and to share in his spirit and his graces.<sup>23</sup>

In short, the Lasallian practice of the presence of God shares the same articulation and spirit as that of Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection. Lawrence wrote in his *Spiritual Maxims*, "Taking special care that this inner awareness, no matter how brief, precedes our activities, that it accompanies these activities from time to time and that we finish all tasks in the same way, we gradually grow the habit."<sup>24</sup> De La Salle wrote of interior recollection, "We must apply ourselves to frequent, short prayers and to interior recollection because they maintain in our heart the fire of the love of God."<sup>25</sup>

So here is the challenge I face in "growing the habit": once ritual prayer—private or shared—is concluded, I resume my interactions with the "world." This isn't a negative thing. Secularity and

the world get a lot of misdirected bad spiritual press. God loves the world.<sup>26</sup> But there is risk; there is evil in this world God loves. There are assumptions, values, and activities that are inimical to those of the Spirit, and “they” are vying for my attention in the world, for if they have my attention they stand to profit from my intention.

In short, “practice of the Presence” requires a “habit of silence.” Not just quiet, silence. I create contemplative space two times in my day—at 6:30 in the morning and 8:30 at night, to be specific. Time to be in touch with my center, or as De La Salle writes, in the depths of my heart and soul.<sup>27</sup> For most of my life I have been following Thomas Merton’s advice to “learn never to choose things that throw a lot of static in this center. Choose to handle things in a way that remains open to this center.” These two times are times to be silent, allowing the static to dissipate and opening my heart to the loving Presence.

Without these two half hours, my efforts to “maintain in my heart the fire of the love of God” in the course of the day fizzles. It is in these two half hours that I renew my enchantment. It’s then that I regain a sense of the profundity in life, which ministry is utterly dependent upon. The ephemera of posts and ads offers next to nothing for the demands of a ministry with its roots in mystery and enchantment.<sup>28</sup>

Sabbath rest, typically one of the weekend days, offers another fundamental way to re-enchant life. Ministry is demanding and sometimes the rewards just can’t compensate for the fatigue. The “habit of Sabbath rest” gives me time to reconnect with the origins of my relationship with Jesus and his enchanting call to love people and the world as he does. As the new week resumes, I can sense that what happened (and didn’t happen) on the Sabbath is available to me. It is the Lord’s life-giving power, quality, and energy moving through me and in some small way flowing into the relationships that shape my ministry. For me, Sabbath rest and silence is stepping away from work and ministry and moving toward attention to the people close to my heart and to the Risen Jesus in my heart.

## **Unlit Mystery**

Once there was a disciple who was very distraught. He pounded insistently on the door of his teacher’s house at midnight. The teacher opened the door. The house was darkened, but the teacher held a candle in his hand. The disciple blurted out that he was filled with anxiety and had to see the teacher at once. The teacher opened wide the door. The disciple entered and the teacher closed the door. Then the teacher blew out the candle.<sup>29</sup>

In this story, I picture De La Salle as the teacher at the door. He welcomes me, listens to my anxiety, invites me in, but then blows out the candle. He shows me how to walk with confidence into the unlit mystery at the heart of life through the four practices of “fidelity to grace examen,” “keeping my attention on God and the people with whom I have been entrusted,” attention to the “practice of the Presence of God,” and habits of silence and sabbath rest.

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<sup>2</sup> Ron Rolheiser, "Paradox, Seeming Inconsistency, and Tension," Ronrolheiser.com, May 5, 2025, <https://ronrolheiser.com/paradox-seeming-inconsistency-and-tension/>

<sup>3</sup> Luke 10:37.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 6:17-26, 27-31; 9:23-25.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 25:31-46; Luke 10:25-37.

<sup>6</sup> Rolheiser, "Paradox, Seeming Inconsistency, and Tension."

<sup>7</sup> Philippians 2:5; *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*, 24.1, 63.3. Translated by Brother Richard Arnandez, FSC and Brother Augustine Loes, FSC and Brother Francis Huether, FSC. Lasallian Publications, 1994.

<sup>8</sup> The mystical and moralizing tendencies are found "in the whole of Lasallian writings." Miguel Campos and Michel Sauvage, *Encountering God in the Depths of the Mind and Heart: A Commentary on John Baptist de La Salle's "Explanation of the Method of Mental Prayer"* (Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1995), page 427.

<sup>9</sup> Described in different contexts in Miguel Campos and Michel Sauvage, *Announcing the Gospel to the Poor* (Christian Brothers National Office, 1981), pages 78, 95, 99, 103-109, 119, 177-178, and 208-210. Cf. "Announcing the Gospel to the Poor [The Two Missing Chapters of the 1981 English Translation]," *AXIS Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 3, No. 1, pages 35 and 82-83.

<sup>10</sup> *Meditations*, 201.3.

<sup>11</sup> *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, translated by Augustine Loes, FSC (St. Mary's College Press, 1975).

<sup>12</sup> "Those inspirations that God gives us are to be valued, and he grants his graces only insofar as we are faithful in following them. Listen to the Holy Spirit, who speaks to you in the depths of your heart" (*The Letters of John Baptist de La Salle. Translated and edited by Brother Colman Molloy, FSC, and Brother Augustine Loes, FSC, Lasallian Publications, 1988, 86.3, 8*).

<sup>13</sup> "We should consider ourselves blessed when we are visited by God through his inspirations. Let us be faithful to them, because to this fidelity God usually attaches a great number of graces. . . . God sends us his holy inspirations only to make us prompt to put them into practice with the intent to accomplish his holy will exactly" (*Meditations*, 141.1, Visitation of the Most Blessed Virgin).

<sup>14</sup> "From the moment that grace came to Saint Paul, he was faithful to it. . . . Do you correspond as promptly as he did to all the movements of grace?" (*Meditations*, 99.2, Conversion of St. Paul).

<sup>15</sup> John Baptiste de La Salle, *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*, edited by Donald Mouton, FSC, translated by Richard Arnandez, FSC (Lasallian Publications, 1995), pages 37-38.

<sup>16</sup> In this regard, Pope Leo XIV, then Robert Prevost, OSA, said in a retreat conference to the 46<sup>th</sup> General Chapter, “Our reality is we are more and more accustomed to stimulation—of the connectivity kind. There is no silence in that connectivity. How do we silence our minds, even our hearts, to open ourselves to God? The challenge is to live in silence and not mistake that for absence” (Author’s notes, April 24, 2014).

<sup>17</sup> Carl Koch, Jeffrey Calligan, and Jeffrey Gros, eds. *John Baptist de La Salle: The Spirituality of Christian Education* (Paulist Press, 2004), page 244.

<sup>18</sup> Acts 20.24.

<sup>19</sup> *The Decrees of General Congregation 35*, Decree 2.2 (2008), page 17.

<sup>20</sup> Romans 12.2.

<sup>21</sup> André Rayez, SJ, suggests that during his earliest years in Paris he may have met him there. “Lasallian Studies in the Mid-Twentieth Century,” in *Spirituality in the Time of John Baptist de La Salle*, edited by Brobert C. Berger, FSC, translated by Philip Smith, FSC (Lasallian Publications, 1999), page 121, fn. 118. Yet if he did not, Brother Lawrence’s mystical practice would have been known to him. Two editions of Lawrence’s writings, including the *Practice of the Presence of God*, were published in 1692 and 1694. Cf. Bernard Hours, *Jean-Baptiste de La Salle: A Mystic in Action* (Washington, DC: Lasallian Publications, 2022), page 569.

<sup>22</sup> Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, *Writings and Conversations on the Practice of the Presence of God*, translated by Salvatore Scieurba, OCD (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2015), page 56.

<sup>23</sup> *Explanation*, page 97.

<sup>24</sup> Nicolas Herman, Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, *Practice of the Presence*, translated by Carmen Acevedo Butcher (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2022), page 53.

<sup>25</sup> *Collection of Various and Short Treatises*, edited by Daniel Burke, FSC, translated by W. J. Battersby, FSC (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1993), page 56.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. John 10:10; 1 Thessalonians 5:9.

<sup>27</sup> In contrast with some contemporaries, De La Salle does not speak of the fine point, center, or summit of the soul to speak of the inner life. He refers to the depths of the heart (forty times) and depths of the soul (fourteen times) in his writings.

<sup>28</sup> See Karl Ove Knausgaard, “The Reenchanted World: On Finding Mystery in the Digital Age,” translated by Olivia Lasky and Damion Searls, *Harper’s Magazine*, June 2025, <https://harpers.org/archive/2025/06/the-reenchanted-world-karl-ove-knausgaard-digital-age/>. Cf. Robert A. Hunt, *All Brain and No Soul? Real Humanity in an AI Age* (Wipf & Stock, 2025).

<sup>29</sup> John Shea, *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers: Year B*, (Liturgical Press, 2005), page 3.