

Confronting Morale in Lasallian Secondary Schools through Radical Belonging and Empathy

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Introduction

This article is adapted from an assignment for the Master of Lasallian Education program at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota. The prompt invited us to articulate our own interpretation of Lasallian spirituality, grounded in our experience as educators and students of the program. The following is a meditation on this passage from *The Teacher's Saint*, by Brother George Van Grieken, FSC: "Lasallian education has the school as its setting, the teacher as its focus, and the salvific potential of education as its inspiration."² I first encountered this quote during the COVID-19 pandemic when I was asked to present to the Board of Trustees at Christian Brothers High School, Sacramento, founded in 1876, where I served as Department Chair for Religious Studies. In preparing the presentation, I realized how much I had internalized the mission of Lasallian education, having both attended and worked at a Lasallian high school. My father also attended this school, and I have formed some of the most meaningful, trusted, adult relationships of my life within the Lasallian community. Yet despite this deep connection, at the time, my official formation in the Lasallian tradition was limited, and I struggled to articulate the charism in a way that I felt was sufficient to the task I had been assigned. Seeking help, I reached out to Charlie Legendre, AFSC, who generously shared a collection of quotes from the Founder and Lasallians across RELAN. That resource remains a cornerstone of my ongoing formation. I celebrate him as a model of Lasallian spirituality and virtue.

The quote above struck me as radical. In my experience, teachers did not always see themselves as central to the spiritual life of the school. There seemed to be much work to do. Teachers must be affirmed and empowered to recognize themselves as the heart of Lasallian spirituality. The transformative, salvific role of education must be proclaimed boldly. It is a beautiful and animating tenet of the Lasallian charism. Perhaps I sound naive, but a perspective "fresh as morning dew" can be powerful. My central thesis is this: Lasallian communities should respond to the universal desire for human wholeness. As living manifestations of the Body of Christ, schools should seek to offer a taste of heaven on earth. This is accomplished through a systemic approach to cultivating a sense of radical belonging and an empathetic vision of schools as spaces for human development, not merely academic achievement.

The 43rd General Chapter: An Ascetic Vision for Lasallian Education

In my classroom, for many years, I posted this truism: "It is often difficult to be honest with ourselves." The 43rd General Chapter of the Lasallian Brothers modeled this honesty, proclaiming that the Lasallian educational mission is shared in co-responsibility with the laity.³ This development, while liberating, carries risks: the potential dilution of Lasallian identity and an urgent need for lay formation. The Lasallian notion of "together and by association" emerged

from a clarity of vision. Emboldened by the ideals of spirit of faith and zeal for service, Lasallian schools embody communion in mission. Adopting an ascetic perspective urges ongoing reflection on our attachment to reality. These defining qualities invite us to see reality as God sees it, with clear eyes focused on the poor and marginalized. As Brother Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría, FSC, notes, “Association for the educational service of those who are poor . . . involves excluding no one and being concerned principally about those who are excluded.”⁴ I describe Lasallian education as defined by a joyful seriousness, work that is serious and rich with purpose and meaning directed at the salvation of soul. It is also work that is filled with unbounded joy. We are blessed to center our work on the lives of precious young people. This requires a Christ-consciousness: a mystic understanding of our interconnectedness.

Lasallian-Catholic spirituality is ordered towards finding a place for each member of the community to confront reality, which naturally results in tending to the needs of the poor and marginalized. As Brother Michel Sauvage, FSC wrote, it is the Spirit that sends us to confront injustice with hope and power.⁵ This spirituality is rooted in *kenosis*, or self-emptying, which does not negate the self but orders it toward the service of the Kingdom.

Lasallian Spirituality and the Pursuit of Human Wholeness

The Christ of the Gospels is other-oriented, radically empathetic, and transformative. A Lasallian school faithful to its Catholic identity does more than maintain sacramental rituals; it becomes a center of *agapic* living. This means the community exists and is organized to serve the spiritual, psychological, and emotional needs of all members. As Sister Ilia Delio puts it, we are all “wholes within wholes.”⁶ Lasallian communities should cultivate wholeness in adults as well as students. This wholeness is a prerequisite for the salvific potential of education to be realized.

De La Salle, moved by the needs of his time, was drawn into the salvific power of education by grace and a spirit of faith. If we are to be wholly made, we must affirm our shared humanity. Scott Sorvaag, Ed.D., describes Lasallian leadership as rooted in a commitment to human wholeness.⁷ Lay educators need formation and care, both spiritual and practical. This is not separate from divine grace but is an expression of it. While we are called to kenotic self-denial, our vocation can and should also nourish us. The French School of Spirituality emphasized *kenosis* so that we may be filled with Christ. The vocational dynamic at the heart of Lasallian philosophy must be animated by spirit, zeal, and communion. Without this spirit, the *Rule* tells us, we become “dead members” of the community.⁸

De La Salle evolved a revolutionary spirituality centered on educators. Following pioneers like Saint Francis de Sales and Mary Ward, he developed a charism that makes educators co-workers with God. According to the International Council for Lasallian Association, Lasallian spirituality is inherently communal, where one’s individuality and accomplishments are frequently at the center of adulthood.

This cannot exist apart from “together and by association.” According to the International Council for Lasallian Association and the Educational Mission in Rome,

Lasallian spirituality is oriented toward community. It is lived in the spirit of faith and zeal together in communion for mission, or better said, in association for the educational

service of the poor. Lasallian spirituality cannot be lived or understood without reference to “together and by association.”⁹

As our ministries evolve, especially with the growing role of laypersons, we must ask how this spirituality translates today. De La Salle responded to early modernity; we respond to secularity, urban poverty, and fragmentation. His words still challenge us: “You are co-workers with God . . . and the souls of the children whom you teach are the field that He cultivates through your labors.”¹⁰

But who tends the adults laboring in those fields?

Programs such as formation, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) initiatives, and professional learning communities all play a role. Yet we need deeper inquiry into their effectiveness. In conversations with educators across RELAN, there is a clear and unifying commitment to the mission. There is also an opportunity to deepen adult relationships grounded in that mission. Our students and educators must be seen, named, and affirmed in their journey toward wholeness. We must meet that yearning with the transformative power of Lasallian-Catholic education.

An effective Lasallian philosophy for leadership must reflect on how leaders, in collaboration with all stakeholders, can support lay professionals. We are called to be co-responsible stewards and guarantors of the mission.¹¹ This means integrating a vision of belonging and human flourishing into leadership itself. We must seek a culture of care where all community members experience love, wholeness, and growth. This culture is real and authentic, not performative. This means building trust by owning when things do not go as planned and apologizing when necessary regardless of fault. Sometimes leaders need to clean up chairs or sub classes. At all times, leaders and all community members should attempt to maintain an attitude of “joyful seriousness.” Leaders committed to this culture should also reflect a steadfast commitment to the five core principles. They should invite community members into decision-making whenever possible, such as when establishing evaluation and growth protocols or defining the portrait of a Lasallian educator as a standard of professional excellence within the local community. Above all it means that community members are seen, known, and noticed. Lasallian leaders do this well, and there is room to grow.

Lasallian Educators and the History We Have Lived

We are living in the shadow of collective trauma: the pandemic, school violence, global and domestic conflict, and economic instability. These realities have reshaped how we view mental health and educator and student well-being. We should also recognize the personal burdens our lay colleagues carry aging parents, parenting, financial stress, and more. Lasallian education cannot eliminate these burdens, but it can continue to cultivate a climate of care and essential belonging.

Professional development and Lasallian formation should be designed with wholeness in mind. Wholeness, in this context, means that we acknowledge educators as whole people beyond role or job description. As whole, embodied persons, we are the relationships we have established, the history we have lived, and the consciousness we have experienced.¹² Engagement in this area

should encourage a collective response to the prayer of Saint Augustine: “*Noverim te, noverim me*” (“May I know you, may I know myself”). We must reject “othering” and instead build communities around inclusive community and respect for all persons. Belonging cannot just be a value; it must be systemic.

John A. Powell of UC Berkeley reminds us,

Structural belonging requires mutual power, access, and opportunity. . .
Operationalizing belonging means all groups contribute to the evolution of that to which they belong—transforming the container itself.¹³

According to this vision, belonging is transformative. The crises of our time can erode our sense of belonging and wholeness. The pressure to succeed, limited support, and cultural anxiety can lead to burnout. We must reignite our Christian and human-centered identity. Every Lasallian deserves a place in the shared pursuit of wholeness. In accordance with the quote above, honoring inclusive community and respect for all persons means respecting the agentic power of the individual and empowering all groups to contribute to the container of Lasallian education.

Conclusion

Lasallian communities are defined by their recognition of God’s love-centered, holy presence. While we already strive for this, growth is always possible. As Brother Jeffery Calligan, FSC, writes, our faith is in “a God who challenges distinctions . . . and calls for an uncompromised wholeness.”¹⁴

Love does not mean avoiding conflict. Authentic community includes disagreement, collaborative problem-solving, and trust built through humility. As Frederick Douglass observed, “Without conflict, no victory.”¹⁵ To continue to respond to reality with ascetic clarity, we must foster growth, take risks, and model vulnerability.

Gratitude should guide our response to the Lasallian tradition. Relationships are central to the mission. From leadership to the classroom, the pursuit of wholeness must shape our educational paradigm. The *Declaration on the Lasallian Mission* tells us, “The pedagogy of fraternity makes us brothers and sisters among all. The educator becomes the older sibling who walks alongside the student in autonomy and care.”¹⁶

Lasallian pedagogy is rooted in deep listening. Our students and colleagues yearn to know the whole of reality and to become what is genuinely good. To pursue the Lasallian ideal of communion in mission, we need “to promote solidarity and collaboration among members of our community, as well as develop a greater sense of openness to all persons, especially to those in need.”¹⁷ Faith, when it meets reason, reveals the deepest truths of the human experience. This spirituality is not defensive or rigid, but creative, dynamic, and faithful to the gospel. By untangling the knots of cultural decline and fear, we become bearers of light in a world tormented by injustice.

Being Lasallian is not a checklist. It is an encounter, a way of being in relationship, in service to the mission. It affirms the relational nature of Lasallian education and demands that we make space for wholeness, creativity, and grace. In the end, our creative fidelity to our mission is what

brings salvation to life. May we all have a meaningful encounter with the charism of Saint John Baptist de La Salle in a way that is defined by a joyful seriousness ordered toward collective salvation for all.

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⁴ Brother D. Muñoz, “Some History,” *La Salle 46th General Chapter*, 2022, <https://fsc46gc.lasalle.org/algo-de-historia/?lang=en>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Iliia Delio, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being: God, Evolution and the Power of Love* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014).

⁷ Scott Sorvaag, “The Nature of Lasallian Leadership,” *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 12, no. 3 (2021), <https://axisjournal.org/2022/01/20/the-nature-of-lasallian-leadership/>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ CIAMEL (International Council for Lasallian Association and the Educational Mission), “A Conversation for the Lasallian Family: Deepening Our Identity” (2020), https://www.lasalle.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/EN_Lasallian_Family_CIAMEL_web.pdf.

¹⁰ Jean-Guy Rodrigue, *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle* (1997).

¹¹ Kurt Schackmuth, *De La Salle’s Journey: One Commitment Leads to Another* (John Johnston Institute at Lewis University, Summer 2024).

¹² Msgr. William H. Shannon, *Here on the Way to There: A Catholic Perspective on Death and What Follows* (Cincinnati: Saint Anthony Messenger Press, 2006).

¹³ Democracy and Belonging Forum, “Democracy and Belonging Forum,” 2014, <https://www.democracyandbelongingforum.org/faq>.

¹⁴ Jeffrey Calligan, “Lasallian Spirituality,” *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 5, no. 3 (2014).

¹⁵ Frederick Douglass, “Self-Made Men: An Address Delivered in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, March 1893,” in *The Speeches of Frederick Douglass: A Critical Edition*, edited by John R. McKivigan and Julie Husband (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), pages 414–453, <https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300240696-022>.

¹⁶ Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, “Declaration on the Lasallian Educational Mission: Challenges, Convictions and Hopes,” 2020, <https://www.lasalle.org/en/declaration-on-the-lasallian-educational-mission/>.

¹⁷ “Spirit of Faith,” *Green Guide 2016*, De La Salle University, <https://www.dlsu.edu.ph/green-guide/values.html>.