

True Cooperators with Jesus Christ¹

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Almost a year ago now as Hurricane Hugo was heading up the east coast of the United States, at the novitiate in Central New York tremendous winds preceded the storm; and I remember sitting in our glass-walled chapel on that particular Friday morning looking out at the white caps on the lake and at the leaves being torn from the surrounding trees. One of the novices was unsuccessfully attempting to secure our boat which was being pulled away from the shore, and so two of us went down and out into the water to help. All three of us working together were barely able to bring the boat to shore.

As I reflected later that morning on the experience, it suggested to me the image of so many parents today caught in the stormy conditions of our present social and cultural reality – parents finding their children being pulled away – and increasingly unable to bring their sons and daughters back to shore – parents being overwhelmed and children in danger of being lost – parents in need of someone willing to accompany them into the turbulence – someone willing to assist them in the Christian guidance and formation of their children.

What also struck me on that particular Friday morning in Skaneateles, New York, was that the boat wasn't doing anything wrong; the boat was only doing what a boat does in a storm; and I believe the same can be said about the young people with whom we work today. Their behavior is most often an understandable response to the tremendous social and cultural upheaval of these final days of the twentieth century.

Far too many of these young people find themselves tossed about in a society replete with a tremendous cultural diversity and an unfortunate moral ambiguity and confusion. Too many are consumed by their own materialism and pursuit of instant gratification. For many, a tremendous peer-group stress, rampant substance abuse, chronic low self-esteem, and poverty of love and affection are a daily reality. Many find themselves without sufficient or appropriate role models. Unfortunately, the time and energy of so many parents, an increasing number of whom are single, is dominated by the task of meeting the material support of their families; and so once again, as in the time of our Founder,³ we see parents in urgent need of our support and assistance.

Within this context, I suggest we hear again today the exhortation of John Baptist de La Salle to understand ourselves as one with Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd of the gospel, who goes in search of the lost sheep to bring it back to the fold.⁴ In the real "poverty" and "abandonment" of North American youth today, we glimpse the awesome responsibility of our mission as true cooperators with Jesus Christ for the salvation of children.⁵

For God so loved our world that, when we were in danger of being lost, God sent the beloved son Jesus Christ to bring us home.⁶ De La Salle believed that God so loved these children that

the Holy Spirit raised up our Lasallian Family in the Church and sent us out among them to bring them home.⁷ I believe that in the deepest core of so many individual teachers today and in the heart of an aging and much humbled Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, this same Holy Spirit continues to cry out and pray: Father, bring me home⁸ – a Spirit who cries out in the abandonment and needs of young people and their parents today – cries out among the too often fatherless urban poor whose champions we once were – cries out from among an upwardly mobile middle-class youth, so often lacking affection and spiritually abandoned by parents who know of God but too often don't know God – a Holy Spirit who cries out and prays to us from the depth of their need: Bring me home.⁹

I suggest to you that, with the prophet Jeremiah, the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools has in recent history – as its numbers have dropped by more than half and the entrance of new candidates has, in numerous countries, slowed to a trickle – been invited with Jeremiah to the potter's shed.

And so I [Jeremiah] went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at the wheel. And whenever the vessel he was making came out wrong, as happens with the clay handled by potters, he would start afresh and work it into another vessel, as potters do.¹⁰

Can we any longer afford to doubt that it really is God who is acting decisively in the circumstances in which we find ourselves to recall and reclaim the Institute and the whole of the Lasallian educational venture to a more honest and authentic living of our own unique identity in the Church? In a world where teaching religion is like teaching a foreign language, the catechetical evangelization and re-formation of poor and abandoned youth in the lived love of God is our principal ministry.¹¹ And yet, how many of us really believe the words of the *Declaration* that this world in which we live has more need than ever, even at the center of humanity's temporal pursuits, for a witness given by a people who know and love God as a living being?¹² How many of us are really willing to pay the price, re-establish the priority, and allow Jesus Christ to be so wholly alive in us that everything we do gives unambiguous and irrefutable witness on behalf of the gospel ... that who we are becomes a clear invitation to the people with whom we work to leave behind the glamour of worldliness and enter more fully into the glory of God's children? How many of us are willing to stand together and pray: Your kingdom come ... your will be done here on earth¹³ ... in my life and for these children?

Each time that we gather for the Eucharist, we baptized Christians, stand around the table of eucharistic remembrance and pray with Jesus: Father, I remain committed – not my will but yours.¹⁴ By our vocation as Christian educators within the Lasallian tradition, we are those who stand with John Baptist de La Salle and consecrate our lives to procure God's glory – the salvation of children – as far as we are able, without counting the cost, and in the manner required of us because we have the confidence that the work we do is truly God's holy work.¹⁵

This is the time, then, to re-commit ourselves to the Christian and human education of youth, confident that, not alone, we are surrounded¹⁶ by our beloved Founder, but the young people for whom and with whom we toil, by the parents of our students and all of our Lasallian colleagues all around the world, and by the very real and human brothers and sisters with whom we work

every day, all of us impelled by that mighty energy of Christ's which is so powerful a force within us.¹⁷

¹ This article was previously published in *Ambassadors of Jesus Christ: Prayer Meditations for Christian Educators* by William Mann FSC, Henry Dissanayke FSC, and Isaias Tzegay FSC (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1995), pages 21-23.

² Brother William Mann was a Secretary of Formation for the Institute and a Visitor of the Lasallian District of Long-Island-New England (LI-NE) before having served as Vicar General (2000-2007) of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

³ Cf. Meditations #193 & #194 in *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle* as translated by Richard Arnandez FSC and edited by Augustine Loes FSC and Francis Huether FSC (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1994).

⁴ Meditation #196.1 in *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle* (Lasallian Publications, 1994).

⁵ Meditation #196.1 in *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle* (Lasallian Publications, 1994).

⁶ Cf. John 3:16 and Romans 5:1-11.

⁷ Meditation #193.3 in *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle* (Lasallian Publications, 1994).

⁸ Cf. Galatians 4:6.

⁹ Meditation #37 in *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle* (Lasallian Publications, 1994).

¹⁰ Jeremiah 18:1-8.

¹¹ Cf. *The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1987), #15.

¹² *The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today: A Declaration*, #11.4 (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1967).

¹³ Cf. Matthew 6:9-13.

¹⁴ Cf. Matthew 26:39.

¹⁵ Cf. *The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1987), #25.

¹⁶ Cf. Hebrews 12:1.

¹⁷ Cf. Colossians 1:29.