

Lasallian Reflection: Finding My Vocation at De La Salle Blackfeet School

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When I graduated from Boston College in 2010, I had no intention of becoming a teacher. Formed and moved by Ignatian values, I was a social justice poster child without a specific focus: men and women for others, go and set the world aflame, etc. I ended up volunteering at Red Cloud Indian School (now Maḥpíya Lúta <https://mahpiyaluta.org/>) on the Oglala Lakota Reservation in Pine Ridge, South Dakota, for three years. As far as I knew, I was simply volunteering, and it just happened to be that I was teaching. Social justice was my vocation, teaching was just an incidental vehicle. I thought I might make a good high school art teacher, so the Jesuits put me as the K-4 religion teacher: a white Protestant art/philosophy major from Alabama teaching Catholic religion to Lakota kids. I suppose this might have had something to do with my questions in the interview about the availability of daily mass or Eucharistic adoration, but it still seemed crazy to me at the time.

The Jesuits were right, however. I fell in love with both the classroom and the Rez. When I reached the three-year maximum allowed there, I went into educational nonprofit work for two years in Detroit before I applied to every Catholic Indian school in the country.

De La Salle Blackfeet School (DLSBS) was one of the places I found myself interviewing in 2015. DLSBS serves sixty to seventy fourth- to eighth-graders a year in the center of Browning, Montana, which is in the heart of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. Browning boasts three stoplights, a Subway, and a Taco John's (!), and is a two-hour drive from the nearest Walmart or airport. Recently traffic near my toddler's daycare was held up by a loose horse in the road. The mountains of National Glacier Park rise to the west twelve miles from Browning, and the surrounding plains are often described as "breezy," with gusts over fifty mph. Roughly fifty miles to the Canadian border, winters are harsh to say the least. In February of 2021, the temperature was below zero for the full month. With extreme rural conditions and extreme temperatures, Browning is the edge of the world for some people, but in many ways, all this is normal for Montana. De La Salle Blackfeet School lies right at the center of town in an old building belonging to the parish that was repurposed as a school but is still used for retreats, catechism classes, and community events.

Many Catholic Indian schools are facing a reckoning. The Jesuits gave \$70,000 to Maḥpíya Lúta for historical research, including for underground radar to search for unmarked graves of past students like the thousands found in residential schools in Canada. No remains have been found to date, but Maḥpíya Lúta (established in 1888) and most other Catholic Indian schools operated during periods of federal policies prioritizing assimilation, termination, and relocation. These Catholic schools were boarding schools responsible for vast cultural and linguistic erasure, often accompanied by abuse of children who had been forced from their families.² As a Lasallian, Catholic, and Blackfeet School, De La Salle Blackfeet School has a particular responsibility and

opportunity for truth and reconciliation about this historical trauma. It is part of our school's mission statement. However, thankfully, it is not part of our school's history.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the charismatic-inspired Cursillo movement swept through the Blackfeet reservation and is still vibrant today. From this retreat movement came the idea to start a Catholic school in the community. After several failed starts and years of advocacy by the local parish, the Christian Brothers began DLSBS with a single fifth-grade class in 2000, adding a class each year until it became the fourth- to eighth-grade school it is today. Even now, during daily Mass, the parishioners, nearly all-Blackfeet, pray for us to grow to a K-12 school. Like our physical parish church, which was built from stones hauled in wagons by Blackfeet families from the corners of the rez to the center of town, DLSBS exists because Blackfeet families wanted it. Not many Catholic schools have opened this century in the USA, and many have closed. DLSBS exists because of the devotion, welcome, and strength of the Blackfeet.

The student body and larger community consist almost entirely of Blackfeet. That presents a unique set of challenges, blessings, and cultural norms. One facet of this is how interwoven family and community are. Grief ripples. Many of my students, and my own two Blackfeet daughters, go to at least a few wakes or funerals a year, often more. This is connected to the high rates of suicide, alcohol and drug abuse, and poverty. However, it is also connected to the Blackfeet people's wealth of interconnectivity, the extensive and meaningful ties to extended families, and the generosity and supportiveness of the community's culture.

When I interviewed with DLSBS, I knew little of this. I had never heard of the Christian Brothers. When Brother Dale Mooney, FSC, started the interview with the prayer, "Let us remember that we are in the Holy presence of God," I thought, "What a beautiful prayer this guy came up with. What a way to start an interview. I'm going to work here."

That was eleven years ago. Since then, I've learned a great deal about what it means to be Lasallian. I can now say with clarity that teaching is my vocation, not a volunteer side quest on my way to my real purpose. However, the vocation of teaching unfolds and reveals itself anew again and again, deepening or needing recentering, like a spouse taken for granted and then seen in startling wholeness, like a renewal of vows.

I am now so much crustier than I was when I started. I remember telling my father in my first year at DLSBS that I could not imagine retiring. Now, at the age of thirty-seven, I will not say how often I imagine retiring, but it is probably more than is healthy for my age. I still love teaching, but it has been a long road, with so much more to go. I am the lead teacher of a new project of combined fourth- and fifth-graders called Little Flower Academy. We focus on building the skills needed to thrive in the difficult age of middle school: academic needs as well as holistic community, social-emotional learning, and executive functioning skills. I have incredible creative freedom and administrative support but also extraordinary challenges. Since COVID, each year about a third of my class arrives from the public school not knowing all their letter sounds. Furthermore, a small number of my students have extreme social, emotional, and behavioral needs that can create instability and unpredictable chaos for everyone in the classroom. Doors slam, desks topple, kids punch themselves in the face. This is my hardest year

yet. I am tired, and tired of the stress. I am tired of acting calm in the face of student behavior and compartmentalizing my reactions so successfully for so long that I feel less human.

And yet, I look at Saint John Baptist de la Salle. He had to advise his Brothers not to beat their students. He had every reason to get crusty. In spite of this, he genuflected when entering the classroom. He approached his students like he was approaching the tabernacle, seeing the True Presence of Jesus Christ in those children. This is at the heart of our vocation as Lasallian teachers: at the beginning of class, we pray a remembrance of God's Holy Presence, that prayer which once so charmed me. Then over and over, we must continue to recognize that Presence in our students, through all the commotion and chaos, assessments and compliance paperwork, outbursts and documentation. We teach knowing that the classroom is a sacred place where we can hope to be a small good thing in the lives of our students. We know that whatever we do to the least of these students, we do to Jesus. Saint Francis once was disgusted by a leper, but being Saint Francis, he got off his horse and kissed the leper and gave him money. The leper then disappeared, because of course the leper was Jesus. If teaching is our vocation, we must see, recognize, and honor the Holy Presence of God in the leper.

I assume most teachers have a leper or two: a student leper, a co-worker leper, a parent leper. Francis said that before his Jesus/leper encounter, lepers nauseated him beyond measure. Hopefully we as teachers do not take it so far, but we might be relieved when that one student (leper) is absent. This year I have a student with whom I have really struggled. I feel like I am always fighting him, and I do not know why there is even a fight. At many points, I felt like he was simmering with anger just for me in some deeply personal way, and that this seething rage would spill on me unpredictably, inevitably, and repeatedly. I also realized that at a very low point within this very difficult year, he may have felt the same about me. I realized I had been judging him as if his attacks were conscious malintent, not the stirrings of a grieving and conflicted ten-year old. I remembered my vocation, this thread of deeper purpose. I began to pray for him, not for my own ability to handle him. I went to confession and sweat lodge. He got better. I got better. Our classroom is so far from perfect, but it got better too . . . then worse, then better, then worse, and so on. I still struggle, but the holy presence of God is there whether I remember and honor God or not. This is my vocation as a teacher: to turn my face to God in discouragement and burnout, to turn my face to God in our students, to approach them like Jesus.

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² Lisa Cavazuti, Cynthia McFadden, Maite Amorebieta, Yasmine Salame, and Richard Schapiro. "A Former Native American Boarding School Reckons with Its Dark Past," NBCNews.com, November 16, 2022. <https://www.nbcnews.com/specials/a-former-native-american-boarding-school-reckons-with-its-dark-past/index.html>.