

Lasallian Spirituality¹

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Today, a simple dictionary definition of the word "spiritual" offers us the following choices: 1) of or concerning the spirit as opposed to matter (spiritual relationship; spiritual home); 2) religious, divine, inspired (the spiritual life); refined, sensitive.

The growth in the post-Reformation period of different kinds of religious congregations which were not monastic in the traditional sense heightened the contrast between those groups which stressed attaining personal salvation through removing oneself from the dangers of a corrupt and corrupting world, and those which stressed the importance of being Christ's voice and active presence in the lives of ordinary people. We need look only at the difficulty encountered by Saints Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac in having the Daughters of Charity recognized as a new form of Christian service by women in the Church to see how much the idea of enclosed contemplative life had been seen as the **one** way of serving God. It is interesting to note, therefore, that the word "spirituality" itself was coined in French only in the course of the early 17th century to distinguish some of the very divergent paths followed by devout Christian men and women as they lived out the Gospel. There is no difficulty in seeing similarities but also important differences when expressions such as "Jesuit spirituality," "Carmelite spirituality," or "Franciscan spirituality" are employed. If, in each case, the proper adjective gives a certain individuality to the noun "spirituality," there seems to be nevertheless a broadly common understanding of the noun itself.

What, then, does the adjective "Lasallian" add to the common understanding of the word "spirituality"? This article suggests that it brings a particular "flavor" or indeed emphasis, because it is inseparably linked to the life-story of Saint John Baptist de La Salle and the world-wide educational movement of which on his own admission he was the largely unwitting founder. It is then both from the deeds and from the writings of De La Salle that we can expect to set out some of the distinctive characteristics of Lasallian spirituality. But we need to note that if the original enterprise of some three hundred years ago attracted persons who were primarily teachers in a formal sense, the living heritage today is shared by a wide range of people, principally teachers but including also social workers, front-office people, all those who can be included within the broad category of Lasallian educators. This is the importance of the Church's 1950 conferring the all enveloping title, Patron of Christian Educators, on Saint John Baptist de La Salle.

The Spirit of Community

When historians ask why De La Salle succeeded better than his predecessors or his contemporaries in establishing lasting schools for the education of poor boys, they recognize that he did so because he "launched a movement" by first forming a community which survived him. His ability to attract others to share a form of community life, neither monastic nor clerical, led

him to allow his followers to decide for themselves what they would be called and how they would live. The decision of those attending the 1686 Assembly in Rheims was that they would henceforth be called “Brothers.” In itself this title for consecrated men who were not clerics was not new but their definition of it was: they saw themselves as “brothers to one another” in their community, and “older brothers” to the young people whom they saw as “confided to their care.” In this one title they expressed their willingness to lead a celibate community life in which they shared everything and at the same time they expressed why they chose to do this: to be the older brothers to the young people whom they saw as “far from salvation” in any religious or human sense. This essential “spirit of community” has become enshrined in the Lasallian heritage through the expression used by the Brothers in the first vowed formula of consecration, “together and by association.” If they associated themselves, each one naming each one of his companions in solidarity, it was in view of a common mission, expressed today as “the educational service of the poor.”

The Spirit of Faith

When De La Salle formulated his original Rule he saw that faithful membership of this community depended first of all on what he called a “spirit of faith”:

The spirit of this community is, first, a spirit of faith, which should induce those who compose it not to look upon anything but with the eyes of faith, not to do anything but in view of God, and to attribute all to God.

Looking with the eyes of faith will lead De La Salle in his meditation for the Feast of the Epiphany to invite his Brothers to a particular way of seeing, as the Magi did in worshipping a poor baby in a manger, “*to look below the rags of the poor children whom you teach and see the Christ-child lying in the manger.*”

Among the many other citations on the spirit of faith which can be found in De La Salle’s writings the following citations from his *Meditations* show most clearly the essential link between the personal faith of the Lasallian and its importance for those “confided to their care”:

Your faith should be for you a light which guides you in all things, and a shining light for those whom you instruct, to lead them on the path to heaven. (No.178.1)

Do you have a faith that is such that it is able to touch the hearts of your students and inspire them with the Christian spirit? This is the greatest miracle you could perform and the one that God asks of you, for this is the purpose of your work. (No.139.3)

The above conviction will lead De La Salle in many of his writings to remind his Brothers that they must see Christ in **all** their pupils, not simply in the better favored or the more intelligent. As someone who suffered contradiction and misunderstanding throughout his whole life, De La Salle was well-placed to exhort his followers to be able to rise superior to whatever difficulties they encountered. Again and again he would remind his Brothers to pray for those pupils with whom they were having most difficulty.

This way of “seeing as God sees,” presupposes that this is not a remote God but someone with whom we form a relationship. The Lasallian teacher tries to be constantly aware of God’s loving Presence in the course of the day. Teacher and pupils will be reminded of this presence by the tinkling of a bell and a short invocation. The first Brothers, as Lasallians all over the world continue to do today, greeted one another by wishing for themselves and for others that “Jesus may live in our hearts, forever!”

The Spirit of Zeal

The Lasallian way of looking upon difficult children was not meant to be a form of Christian stoicism – for De La Salle and for all Lasallians today the spirit of faith should overflow and shows itself through a spirit of zeal:

Secondly, the spirit of their Institute consists in an ardent zeal for the instruction of children and for bringing them up in the fear [=awe] of God ...

This burning or ardent zeal was to be expressed by “being with the children from morning until night” every day of the week, including the Sunday when the catechism lesson took place in the school.

This zeal for those confided to their care will lead Lasallians to try “to touch the hearts” of those with whom they work, so that they may more easily lead those with whom they work to God. De La Salle recognizes the struggle that this may sometimes represent when he occasionally uses the variation that our duty is “to **win** hearts.” The change of verb suggests that sometimes we may have to work much harder to break down forms of resistance. But, “touching” or “winning,” De La Salle reminds us, in five different references to his patron John the Baptist in his meditations, that our duty resembles that of John the Baptist in always pointing beyond ourselves to the “Lamb of God,” willing that we **decrease** and that He **increase**!

For De La Salle the essential relationship between “faith” and “zeal” is brought out in many of his writings, one of the clearest being in Meditation No. 87 on Saint Stephen, the proto-martyr:

This is how faith should make you act and how you should make known by your conduct, as [Saint Stephen] did, that you are true disciples of Jesus Christ, having God only in view in all your actions, and announcing with as much boldness and courage as he did, the maxims of the holy Gospel. In all this what should strengthen your zeal as well as your faith is the fact that you announce these truths in your position as ministers of God.

A “Practical” Spirituality

These three “spirits” show the essential unity of Lasallian spirituality in its origins. This community of Brothers working in elementary schooling was never simply a catechetical group interested only in passing on solid Christian doctrine and practices. Catechetical instruction was indeed “their principal duty” but they would spend six hours of school time each day teaching such fundamental human subjects as reading, writing, arithmetic and spelling.

De La Salle, clearly recognizing the traditional view of spirituality of his time as the means taken to achieve personal salvation, expresses the importance of this “new” and “apostolic” spirituality in the Rule:

Make no distinction between the duties of your profession and those that refer to your salvation and perfection. Be convinced that you will never achieve your salvation more surely nor acquire greater perfection than by fulfilling well the duties of your profession, provided you do so with the view of God's will.

The Lasallian community today consists of people who bind themselves in solidarity with others to ensure that the Christian school or Lasallian work in which they work will be a place of “salvation” for all the young people who attend it. For no one is to be excluded. This “school” is to be gratuitous, open to all, and it is to prepare young people to become whole, complete persons who will acquire the learning and the human skills which will enable them to live with dignity so as, in the famous words of the *Conduct of Schools*, “to be able to do anything.”

From such a viewpoint, Lasallian spirituality is lived through the multifarious activities which are typical of an educator's day, the greater part of which is going to be spent in educational activities of many kinds. While the Lasallian educator may be grateful for the personal relationship with God felt occasionally in the peace and quiet offered by being able to pray alone in church or chapel, Lasallian spirituality stresses that it is mainly in the relationship to students and colleagues that the presence and love of God manifested in Jesus Christ is to shine through words and actions. This is not a spirituality which flees from engagement with life but one which balances up the personal relationship with a loving God with that of being the presence and action of God in relationship to others.

John Baptist de La Salle lived and died as a Catholic priest in 17th-century France without ever leaving his native country, but his “spirituality” has proved to have an appeal well-beyond the culture in which it originated. Today, many people who choose to work in a Lasallian work may not necessarily share the Christian heritage on which the work was founded. Among such persons are Christians of other denominations, Moslems, Buddhists, Hindus, Confucianists, and Shintoists, followers of traditional religions or of no religion at all. Many find themselves in agreement with Lasallian emphases on such basic principles as gratuity, compassion and personal relationships – all things beyond the material – and expressive therefore of a “spirituality.” This is particularly so when they see the Lasallian enterprise working to “save” young people **from** the consequences of structural poverty in order to prepare them **for** a life lived with greater dignity as human beings. This broad understanding of “salvation [= completeness, wholeness]” is deeply rooted in De La Salle’s use of the complementary terms “instruction = religious instruction” and “education = reading, writing etc.” at which the first Brothers spent the greatest part of each school day.

Some Sustaining Metaphors of Lasallian Spirituality

As a natural expression and development in a practical way to the three spirits already mentioned above, Lasallian spirituality is grounded in some very down-to-earth actions. Throughout his *Meditations*, especially in the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, De La Salle reminds his

teachers of the dignity of their calling by some very clear directions about what he calls their ministry. Here are some of the many examples:

You are called by God to your work

You are the ones whom [God] has chosen to help in this work by announcing to these children the Gospel of his Son and the truths that are contained in it. (No.193.3)

You have been chosen by God to make Jesus Christ known and to proclaim him. (No.87.2)

It is God who has called you, who has destined you for this work, and who has sent you to work in his vineyard. (No.201.1)

You are co-workers with God

Let this be your whole effort in the instructions you give them, looking upon yourself as the ministers of God and the dispensers of his mysteries. (No.193.1)

Jesus Christ wants you to understand ... that the more your work for the good of your disciples is given life by him and draws its power from him, the more it will produce good in them. (No.195.3)

You work for the poor

Every day you have poor children to instruct. Love them tenderly as this saint [Saint Cyprian] did following in this the example of Jesus Christ . . . these poor are also the ones whom God has entrusted to you and to whom you are obliged to proclaim the truths of the holy Gospel (166.2)

God has had the goodness to remedy so great a misfortune [i.e. the plight of the children of artisans and the poor] by the establishment of the Christian schools, where the teaching is offered free of charge and entirely for the glory of God (No.193.2 & 3)

Through the movement of the Holy Spirit

You need the fullness of the Spirit of God in our state, for you should live and be guided only according to the spirit and the light of faith. It is only the Spirit of God who can give you this disposition (No.43.2)

You carry out a work that requires you to touch hearts, but you cannot do this except by the Spirit of God. Pray to him to give you today the same grace he gave the holy apostles, and ask him that, after filling you with his Holy Spirit to sanctify yourselves, he also communicate himself to you in order to procure the salvation of others. (43.3)

Toward a Conclusion

De La Salle's own life was marked by a profound sense of openness to discerning and doing God's will as he saw it. This is clear in the fragment called the *Memoir on the Beginnings* in which he recognizes that he was led by a

God, who guides all things with wisdom and serenity and whose way it is not to force the inclinations of persons, willed to commit me entirely to the development of the schools. He did this in an imperceptible manner and over a long period of time, so that one commitment led to another in a way that I did not foresee in the beginning.

Thus, through the "chance meeting" with a stranger at the convent of the Sisters of the Child Jesus, he saw himself guided [conduit] by God to making vows for life with a group of laymen some 14 years later. It is this same conviction which he expresses on his death bed by the words "I adore the guidance [conduite] of God in everything concerning me."

Lasallian spirituality is, therefore, like all spiritual movements in that it is based on a profound interiority, a relationship of trust and confidence in a loving God who, in De La Salle's words, "wishes everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (No.193.1). But this spirituality is lived out in an educational relationship which is earthed in all the difficulties and contradictions of life which can make relationships conflictual and difficult. This tension in itself becomes creative when true Lasallians find strength and solace in trying to see as God sees and being prepared to be zealous in acting without self-interest in doing whatever is judged best for the good of those whom they see as "confided to their care."

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² The late Brother Gerard Rummery, FSC, (1931-2024) earned his doctorate from Lancaster University. He served two periods on the staff of the International Lasallian Center (CIL) in Rome, was twice elected to the General Council of the De La Salle Christian Brothers (1986-1993 and 1993-2000), and acted as the contact Brother with the Brothers in Hungary, Romania, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. He was a researcher and longtime international presenter on Lasallian history, pedagogy, and spirituality. His career was marked by his dedication to modernizing Lasallian education and challenging traditional approaches.