

On a Lasallian Methodology: Some Initial Thoughts¹

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Introduction:

I like to tell my students that the university is a unique institution of learning because it is organized around disciplines and that disciplines are really ways of thinking. For some time I have tried to find a way to use my discipline of history as a way to explore the relationship between the Lasallian charism and the university through the historical experience of the Founder and the Brothers of the Christian Schools. This effort has not been particularly successful because one needs to think like a historian to access this approach. So, how does one adapt an academic discipline for a general audience; particularly one that places great emphasis on primary sources? If one thinks a bit, the notion of organizing ourselves around a historical document is not as farfetched as it might at first seem. After all as Americans we associate, literally federate ourselves, around a document, the Constitution of the United States, which is more than two centuries old. What makes this possible, I think, is that the Constitution is principally made up not so much of specifics as precepts that guide and which can also be adapted to issues that the Founders never anticipated. It is not so fanciful to think of the Constitution as a methodology, a process of and for government.

We know that any attempt to separate induction from deduction is futile and false. The historical method is highly inductive: it is decidedly aware that there are always particular differences of time and place that make all historical experiences unique. Yet it also constructs historical periods which are nothing more than broad generalizations. This article attempts to do something that I am not entirely comfortable with as a historian since it turns our usual method upside down. Instead of gathering data from specific pieces of evidence within general concepts or contexts, it attempts to formulate general concepts from one of those unique and specific historical experiences: the formation of association by the Brothers and John Baptist de La Salle. It not only runs the risk of decontextualizing, one of the cardinal sins of historical inquiry, but also attempts to re-contextualize the experiences of professed religious and a saint, three hundred years old, and from a culture that no longer exists, into our own experience.

Having committed these violations against the historical discipline, I ask the reader to understand my reluctance to alter the original epistolary nature of the composition and its audience. Tampering with a primary source is a serious offense. Thus I have preserved the letter's form and I have made minimal changes to the original draft. I have revised the first paragraph to make it more amenable to a reading public broader than the original audience and I have made a few

¹ This article was originally written in response to an invitation to gather with colleagues to begin to discuss possibilities for Lasallian association in Winona, Minnesota. The initial invitation went out in January 2011 from Brother William Mann to a variety of Lasallian colleagues in the Winona and Minneapolis areas. Dr. Tristano wrote the following in response to the initial meeting to explore the idea of a "Lasallian Methodology," a process whereby we would establish the nature and purpose of the Association that was inspired by the life and thought of the Founder, John Baptist de La Salle, and the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

alterations to clarify some passages and to broaden the original context. In addition, I have added a section following the letter on “Some Theoretical Considerations of Methodology,” which were inappropriate in its original context, but befits this more formal publication space provided by *AXIS*.

Dear Colleagues in Association,

I am somewhat concerned about the procedure we seem to have embraced, namely the reading of institutional documents of the General Council (“Circular Letter”), the Midwest District (“Framework for Association”), and the Superior General (“Prophetic Stance”).² I will describe this process as deductive, which I define for our purposes as knowledge based on premises, here received institutional knowledge. This concern is in large part nurtured by my recent reading of Brother Léon Lauraire’s volume on The Conduct of Schools, A Contextual Approach.³ What Brother Léon helped me to understand was how much the Christian Schools were a response to an urgent need and based on a thorough knowledge of the lives of the urban poor. While the “Circular Letter” contains many fine ideas, it lacks a specific reference to the urgency of Saint Mary’s University’s existence. The Christian Schools and especially The Conduct of Schools were created within and in response to a specific context. In turn this determined the mission of the society to which the Brothers associated themselves. In this sense Lasallian association is organic and communal; it flows out of a mission that meets an urgent need and seeks associated solutions. What is the urgent need of the particular local ministry for which individuals are associated? Institute documents and Church organizational structures are elements for consideration but are not “a priori” models for creating a new model of association. The Founder and Brothers established something innovative around which they associated, because they proceeded by trial and error and not in response to some received knowledge, for example, the tutorial method of the Little Schools, instruction in Latin, and excluding the more prosperous from the Charity Schools. To proceed as De La Salle and the Brothers did, persons exploring association need a methodology by which I mean principles that guide our empirical inquiry into association and how the method, the actual tools of investigation are to be deployed. Those tools must be authentically Lasallian if we are to create an authentic “Lasallian methodology.” What are these tools?

*My first assumption is that we cannot go wrong by centering ourselves in the **experience** and thought of the Founder. Brother Léon quotes the famous section in the preface to the Conduct where the Founder refers to the method employed, that nothing has been added that has not been learned by frequent conferences between him and the oldest Brothers, and only after years of experience and thorough testing and deliberation.⁴ The translator explains in a footnote that “conferences” refer to a sense of working in common, an association. Brother Léon then comments: “The **direct participation** of the Brothers in this **reflection** process and the indispensable contribution of their **concrete experience** added further to the **observations** made by De La Salle himself during his **classroom visits**.”⁵ Brother Léon refers to this as an **inductive process** and I placed parts of it in bold as a working definition of this induction. So, my first conclusion is that a Lasallian methodology is inductive, a process of knowing and reflecting that is bottom up rather*

than top down, based on the concrete experience and the observation of the direct participants, in this case us as associates, and in the specific context of Saint Mary's University as a particular Lasallian institution of teaching and learning.

My second point is that the Conduct, indeed all of the Founder's writings, are filled with binaries.⁶ I define binary as a whole composed of two complementary, related, and necessary ideas. We could make a long list of these Lasallian binaries. The school day of the Christian school was itself a construction of the profane subjects of writing, reading, and arithmetic coupled with the attendance at Mass, the study of catechism and the examination of conscience in the afternoon.⁷ The Lasallian educational mission was defined as the practical education of the poor for the purpose of gainful employment and the salvation of souls.⁸ The meditation for the feast of Saint Louis speaks of zeal for the good of the Church and zeal for the good of the state.⁹ The treatise on decorum and civility refers to the first in terms of the self-control of the individual and the second with relation to neighbor and society.¹⁰ Of course the most famous Lasallian binary is probably the idea of teaching minds, touching hearts. So, we can see that a Lasallian methodology would have to reflect these sorts of binaries: profane/sacred studies; survival in the world/hope for the world beyond; Church and state; individual/neighbor; mind/heart. It would be easy to gloss over these binaries or worse to see them as incoherent. They are in fact the very essence of the genius of the Founder, for they are profoundly Catholic in being "both-and," they reflect the practicality yet transcendence of the Lasallian educational mission, its embrace of the Christian in the world, and the fullness of our humanity as reflective of both body and soul. Of course the overall operative binary for us is the charism of the Lasallian educational mission and the academic and liberal identity of the university, which brings us back to exploring association in the specific context of the urgent need of a specific local ministry such as Saint Mary's University of Minnesota.

*Finally, it is necessary to pull together these two essentially Lasallian methods - induction and the binary - into a coherent Lasallian methodology. It is clear that Lasallian binaries are meant to be synthesized which presents the challenge of creating a university which is truly Lasallian: a Lasallian university. We might say that Lasallian methodology is the principles that guide us in our inquiry and those principles are discovered in the practice of the Founder, for "Lasallian" can have no greater meaning than as referring to the experience of John Baptist de La Salle. The methods or actual tools of investigation are **induction, the binary, urgent need, and association**. Therefore, a more authentic way to proceed is through our **direct participation, our reflection on our own concrete experience and observations** in dialogue with a series of **binaries** that relate to **need** around which we **associate**. These binaries are to be determined but one already suggested is how we are associated for both the charism of the Lasallian educational mission and the academic and liberal mission of the university. To clarify this very briefly, we might define the first in terms of love and the second in terms of rigor, producing a love/rigor binary.¹¹ Another might be association as practiced by the Brothers and association as practiced by faculty and staff respectively. Still others might be association as institutional and association as charismatic. Others are association as public and private; professional and religious, all of which require relation to need. This*

does not, of course, preclude us from profiting from the lived experience of the Brothers, though I think that association among the Brothers as professed religious must inevitably be different from the association of a mixed group of college faculty, staff and Brothers, such as ourselves. The greatest challenge of this mixed group may be the synthesis of our distinctive reflective experiences which must be allowed to find their own way as De La Salle allowed the Brothers to find theirs. The historical, early Lasallian "association" of single vowed males is quite a different experience than the "association" of single and married men and women, Christians of many denominations, Jews, Muslims, other believers, and nonbelievers. Yet we should not be intimidated by this challenge, could we not say that the original association of a talented, well-educated, upwardly mobile priest with non-ordained, ordinary laymen who dared to teach the catechism was just as radical a notion in the context of 17th-century France?

We can and should find areas of common thinking with the Institute. For example the Circular Letter reads: "Effective formation is rooted in the experience of a community of learners."¹² In addition, Brother Álvaro speaks of smashing the marvelous vessel we have inherited and embracing a new model out of the old.¹³ This means, I think, that like the Founder and the Brothers, who through the Christian Schools defined a new vision of education and a new pedagogical method that rejected many traditional practices, we should rely on our informed experiences as university Lasallians. Similarly, we need to develop a new kind of association in the specific methods, procedures, pedagogy, and organization of Saint Mary's University that we follow, day by day and year by year. Lifetime faculty and staff at Saint Mary's University have in effect made a similar vow of stability as the early Brothers did. Brother Álvaro also speaks of a mission "inter gentes," which means, I think, association as a dialogue among ourselves, as he puts it open, trusting, and with mutual respect. Finally, Brother Álvaro warns us not to be afraid and not to reduce structures to the purely functional. This means, I think, that the Superior General wishes us to empower ourselves in the prophetic spirit of the Founder. I can't fully account for the behavior of De La Salle on his return to the community in 1724 other than to state the obvious, that he wished the Brothers to figure out on their own how to proceed associated in support of their mission.

If you think that synthesizing these Lasallian methods of the inductive, binary, need-based, and associated into a coherent methodology will be easy to implement, you are wrong; and if you think that I have some concrete plan in place, you are even more mistaken. But it is a leap worth taking, together, and a very Lasallian one at that.

Richard Tristano

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Some Theoretical Considerations of Methodology:

In composing the above letter, I found it useful to consult some of the literature on methodology. Abraham Kaplan makes an essential distinction between "method" and "methodology". "I mean by *methodology* the study – the description, the explanation, and the justification – of methods, and not the methods themselves."¹⁴ He continues, "The aim of methodology, then, is to describe

and analyze these methods, throwing light on their limitations and resources, clarifying their presuppositions, and consequences, relating their potentialities to the twilight zone at the frontiers of knowledge.... In sum, the aim of methodology is to help us to *understand*, in the broadest possible terms, not the products of scientific inquiry but the process itself.”¹⁵ I hope that this is what I have accomplished in my letter.

So, in the context of the letter the method is Lasallian, that is, based on the life and thought of John Baptist de La Salle and the Brothers of the Christian Schools. I suggested certain characteristics of this method such as induction and urgent need. The methodology is an explanation of the method. It is above all a process. In this case a process for describing and developing Association, explaining and justifying its purpose. Though this is not the purpose of the letter, presumably the Lasallian methodology, as process, can be applied to other Lasallian endeavors beyond association.

Robert G. Burgess offers another perspective and helpful breakdown of methodology into its component parts.¹⁶ He classifies **general methodologies**, as associated with principles that guide an empirical inquiry. The principle of adapting the methodology of the Founder would be, perhaps, the most general methodology of all. The **research strategy** or **procedure** is the way a particular study is designed. Choosing to follow a procedure of deduction from received knowledge or to allow our own inductive experiences to determine our strategy would be an example of a chosen strategy. Finally, he cites **research process** which he defines as the interrelationship between the two, between the guiding principles and the actual procedures used. This seems to me to be the key to the entire process and certainly the most difficult to attain as it is nothing less than the practical implementation of the guiding principles. It also happens to be another binary, the one that links method to methodology.

Notes

1. I wish to thank Brother Paul Grass, FSC and Brother Robert Smith, FSC for their very helpful suggestions to improve this essay, and Ms. Lori Pesik for her help in exploring some of the more theoretical questions of methodology.

2. *Circular 461*, “Associated for the Lasallian Mission . . . an Act of Hope,” (Rome, 2010); “Framework for Association” (approved by the Midwest District January 17, 2011); Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría, FSC, “The Prophetic Stance of Association for Mission” (2010).

3. Léon Lauraire, FSC, *The Conduct of Schools, A Contextual Approach*, trans. Leonard Marsh, FSC (Rome: Maison Saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle, 2008).

4. Lauraire, 6-7.

5. Lauraire, 6.

6. I have struggled to find the right term here and rejected dualism as suggesting something Manichean, which would do the Founder a disservice.

7. John Baptist de La Salle, *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*, trans. F. de La Fontainerie and Richard Arandez, FSC., ed. William Mann, FSC (Landover, Maryland: Lasallian Publications, 1996), 34.

8. See especially the *Second Meditation for the Time of Retreat*, in John Baptist de La Salle, *Meditations*, trans. Richard Arandez, FSC and Augustine Loes, FSC, ed. Augustine Loes, FSC, and Francis Huether, FSC (Landover, Maryland: Lasallian Publications, 1994), 434-436.

9. *Meditations*, 296

10. *The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility*, trans. Richard Arandez, FSC, ed. Gregory Wright, FSC (Landover, Maryland: Lasallian Publications, 1990), 4. "Christian decorum is, then, that wise and well-regulated conduct which governs what we do and say. It arises from sentiments of modesty, respect, union, and charity toward our neighbor. It leads us to give due regard to proper times and places and to the people with whom we have to deal. Decorum practiced toward our neighbor is properly called civility."

11. On the relationship of the Lasallian educational mission and the liberal arts see Richard Tristano, "The Liberal Arts, the University, and the Lasallian Educational Mission," *Listening*, 45 (Winter 2010), 36-50.

12. *Circular 461*, 62, section 6.11.

13. "Prophetic Stance," un-paginated Ms., but section 3.

14. Abraham Kaplan, *The Conduct of Inquiry, Methodology for Behavioral Science* (San Francisco: Chandler Pub. Co., 1964), 18.

15. *Ibid.*, 23.

16. Robert G. Burgess, "Methods of Social Research." *The Social Science Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed., Adam Kuper and Jessica Kuper eds. (London: Routledge, 1996), 533-536.