

That Strange Word: Lasallian

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Introduction

Brother Vincent, you have generously accepted responsibility for leading the Christian Brothers University educational community to live its mission: to live it with faith that it is God's work, to live it with sound vision, to live it with the passionate enthusiasm John Baptist de La Salle called *zeal*, and to live it, in his words, "together and by association."

You consistently remind us that CBU is *Catholic, Lasallian, Distinctive*. During this past year I have had the opportunity to address the faculty, staff, and Board of Trustees on the *Catholic* dimension of CBU. My theme this afternoon is the second of the three adjectives: *Lasallian*. I have entitled this talk "That Strange Word: *Lasallian*." I am convinced that one person who finds the word quite perplexing is John Baptist de La Salle himself. I can almost hear him saying, "What is this talk about *Lasallian*? I founded Christian schools. To run them I founded the society of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. What are people talking about?" Many of you are Memphians and have a long relationship with Christian Brothers College, Christian Brothers High School, Christian Brothers University. You too are asking about this strange word *Lasallian*.

I propose seven characteristics of a *Lasallian* institution.

Reverence for Each Student as a Unique Person

The starting point of Lasallian education is the student. Our institutions exist for no other reason than to respond to the needs of students. Today the international Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools invites all of us – administrators, teachers, staff, board members, former students, benefactors – to see ourselves as men and women called by God to wholehearted commitment to the education of youth and adults; and, as such, men and women called to have profound reverence for each student. This reverence will lead inevitably to communicating to each, with and without words, "You are important. You have unique talent and potential. Strive to be the person God wants you to be." Reverence means approaching each student with loving and active concern. It means being ready to "walk side by side" with students as they wrestle with questions that touch the very meaning of their existence.

Walking around the campus one evening some months ago, I met two students that I know personally. One of them was complaining about some rather small matter. I teased him a bit and encouraged him to be brave. He laughed and acknowledged that the matter was not really of earthshattering importance. More than that, he added, "Brother, there are many very positive things about CBU." I responded, "For example?" "Brother," he said, "at CBU the teachers really

care about us. They take their teaching very seriously. They want us to succeed. They are ready and willing to help us when we need help.”

Lasallian education is always about the students. Reverence for each student is the most fundamental of the characteristics that constitute Lasallian education.

The Spirit of Community

John Baptist de La Salle was not the first to establish schools for the poor children of his day, but it is historically accurate that he was one of the few to succeed. Many attempts at education, especially of boys, failed because the teachers were neither motivated nor trained. De La Salle and the first teachers succeeded because the children knew the Brothers loved them. Experiencing this love, they grew in self-esteem. They were motivated to develop their God-given potential. More than that, they learned that they had to be in loving relationships with one another. The schools were successful because a spirit of community reigned in them. The students were happy. They knew they were learning and found great satisfaction in their accomplishments. They knew that caring teachers were helping them liberate themselves from the slavery of illiteracy and ignorance. The organization of the schools called for students to accept responsibility for a variety of services to one another. These all-male schools helped boys learn to be brothers to one another.

Jesus came to announce and promote the Kingdom of God, the world that God wants the world to be: a communion of persons that God loves unconditionally. A world where people receive that love and in turn love one another, love one another across the racial, ethnic, national, religious, political, economic boundaries that so often divide us. A love without boundaries, a love that is unconditional and universal. The world that God wants to exist is a world where all can live in dignity, justice, and peace.

Lasallian schools are signs of the Kingdom of God. Christian Brothers University specifically, must make this kind of world visible. It must manifest that it is possible to live together as brothers and sisters, sons and daughters of the same God. What a wonderful opportunity we have. CBU is blessed to be diverse racially, ethnically, religiously, economically. We thank God for the spirit of community that exists, and commit ourselves to building on this strength.

Quality Education

De La Salle and his disciples succeeded not only because of the love they had for their students and the spirit of community they created among them, but also because the students really learned. De La Salle and the Brothers spent hours searching for and developing methods for helping the young people they had in their schools learn to read, to speak, to write, to calculate, to understand the essentials of their religion. When Lasallian men and women today discover the pedagogical writings of De La Salle and of his successors, they are amazed at the methods these pioneers developed, methods grounded in loving concern for and attention to each student.

I am not the person – nor is this the appropriate time – to talk about the academic programs at CBU. I limit myself to expressing a conviction of many years. We must be who we claim to be.

We describe ourselves as a university with small classes and with competent teachers who take genuine and loving interest in helping students learn and grow. I believe there is quality teaching at CBU. Students in this institution, undergraduate as well as graduate, know they have highly qualified teachers. Strong, quality teaching is a strength that CBU must continue to build upon. Quality teaching must characterize Christian Brothers University.

Catholic

De La Salle called his schools *Christian Schools* and the society he founded the *Brothers of the Christian Schools*. While we might like to credit De La Salle with pioneering in the ecumenical movement, we cannot. For De La Salle, to be Christian was to be Catholic; to be Catholic was to be Christian. In this regard he was a man of his time. Nevertheless, it is true that he conducted schools that were open to young people who were not Catholic and that he insisted the Brothers treat them with respect.

CBU describes itself as a Catholic institution of higher education in the tradition of the [De La Salle] Christian Brothers. At the same time, CBU acknowledges that it is a multi-faith institution: the percentage of declared Catholics in the day and night schools combined is less than 25%. CBU describes itself, therefore, as a *Catholic* institution with a multi-faith educational community.

From its earliest days Christian Brothers College described itself, without ambiguity, as a Catholic institution, but welcomed young people of all faiths. That welcome led Memphians to call CBC a *Temple of Tolerance*. Today there are four Lasallian institutions in Memphis: university, high school, and two Jubilee primary schools. Each is Catholic with a multi-faith educational community.

Openness and respect toward young people of all faiths is a reality not *despite* the fact we are Catholic, but, rather, *because* we are Catholic. Pope John Paul II stated that the Church, *because* it is Catholic, is “open to dialogue with all other Christians, with the followers of non-Christian religions, and with all people of good will.” The Pope’s comment is an affirmation of what Lasallians have done in Memphis for 135 years.

CBU board, administrators, faculty, and staff must be intentional and proactive in articulating the identity of CBU as Catholic and commit themselves to making CBU the institution it claims to be. They must be ready to address the questions and concerns of students who are searching for meaning, students with profound religious, philosophical, and moral questions. Students of CBU must have opportunities to pursue truth and knowledge in a faith-inspired atmosphere free from any kind of political correctness, whether of the right or of the left. The university must provide students excellent religion and philosophy courses taught by highly qualified professors. Moreover, a campus ministry program that enjoys high priority must provide students the opportunity to live their faith with others of faith. CBU must make available celebrations of the Eucharist, prayer, and other appropriate religious services.

Solidarity with the Poor

Solidarity with the poor is an essential characteristic of a Lasallian institution. John Baptist de La Salle created schools that would give economically poor children the opportunity to receive a solid education. To make such schools a reality, he founded the society of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

Today Lasallians strive to the best of their ability to make their educational institutions available to young people from middle and low-income families. In countries such as the United States, where financial assistance from the government is not available, or available only in limited ways, pursuit of this objective is often painful and frustrating. Still, pursue it we must. For this reason CBU, with the help of generous benefactors, strives to provide financial assistance to those in need.

As important as it is to make our institutions as available as possible, solidarity with the poor has other dimensions. Students in Lasallian institutions must have opportunities to know and struggle with issues of poverty, justice, and peace. They must come to know the social teaching of the Catholic Church. These teachings often startle us. They challenge us to examine our values and to commit ourselves to building a world where all can live in dignity, justice, and peace. Theoretical knowledge, however, is not sufficient. Lasallian institutions at all levels must give high priority to service programs, programs that provide opportunities for *all* students to serve others.

Graduates of CBU must be women and men who have received a solid education in accord with their gifts, learned what it means to live as sons and daughters of God, learned to live as sisters and brothers among themselves, and learned to *be* brothers and sisters to and for others, women and men committed to making a difference.

An Educational Community That Is Authentically Lasallian

De La Salle stumbled into the mission of founding Christian schools for the poor. He wrote that God led him in an imperceptible way over a long period. He began by finding space for schools for the poor. He soon recognized that providing space was not enough. He realized that what was important was the quality of teachers – and he was not happy with what he saw. Consequently, he and the teachers began working together, exploring ways of teaching poor children effectively. He quickly became convinced that teachers living and working as a community could be highly effective in the educational process. As a result, he invited the teachers to live together. In time these groups became faith communities. And a short time later, the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools became a reality, a society of men consecrated to God and committed to work “together and by association” for the education of children and youth, especially poor children and youth.

Today the Brothers constitute only 3% of the 80,000 men and women engaged in the mission as administrators and teachers. Thousands more serve as staff members, parents, former students, board members, and benefactors. Our institutions are no longer Brothers’ schools, as they once were. That is why we call them Lasallian schools. That is why we invite our coworkers to

understand Lasallian mission and to participate wholeheartedly in making the characteristics that De La Salle considered essential realities in our institutions.

Living Today Our Founding Story

Reverence for each student, spirit of community, quality education, Catholic identity, solidarity with the poor These five characteristics can and certainly do exist in other educational institutions. In themselves they do not make us different or distinguish us. What distinguishes us is that we live these characteristics around the story of John Baptist de La Salle and the first Brothers. Recalling and celebrating this story expresses and nourishes our identity. The story inspires and challenges us. It plays an indispensable role in the way we understand ourselves and our mission. We strive to live the story today, in a world and time very different from that of France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

In union with the thousands of other men and women living the same story in 80 countries of the world, we Lasallians of the CBU educational community strive to respond to the needs of both young and adult learners. We strive to live our mission at CBU in a way that John Baptist de La Salle would recognize and would approve.

Brother Vincent, we welcome you as our new president. We acknowledge and appreciate the challenge that is yours. We commit ourselves to work “together and by association” under your leadership in the service of those God is confiding to our care at Christian Brothers University.

Endnotes

1. These remarks were delivered on 23 April 2006 at Christian Brothers University in Memphis, Tennessee, which was the occasion of the inauguration of Brother Vincent Malham FSC, DMus, as the university’s twenty-first president.

2. Brother John Johnston, FSC, (1933-2007) served both as vicar general (1976-1986) and superior general (1986-2000) of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. During the last few years of his life, he returned to his home city of Memphis and lived in the community of De La Salle Christian Brothers on the campus of CBU.