
ANNOTATION

Ryan, Peter J. “The Work Is Ours: Nurturing and Sustaining Charism in Catholic Schools in the Lasallian Tradition.” DMin dissertation, Fordham University, 2019. 178 pp.

Peter Ryan’s dissertation is a valuable resource for Lasallian educators who are interested in the preservation and deepening of the Lasallian identity in their ministries. Though directly addressing secondary schools in Australia and New Zealand, his research and the method he proposes for the enhancement of Mission (*A Method for Nurturing Lasallian Charism [MNLIC]*) pertain to Lasallian schools and ministries at all levels, as well as to other Catholic schools guided by the charism of a religious Founder/Foundress.

In the *Introduction* Ryan offers a brief discussion of the concept of charism, a discussion amplified in the first chapter of the dissertation, noting that for purposes of the dissertation he is using Michael C. Green’s definition of charism as a “Spirit-given way for people to share in the life of the Church, a way of being Christian that is appropriate to them as individuals and groups, and suits the needs and imperatives of their particular circumstances” (21). Further, in his *Introduction*, Ryan describes the intent of his dissertation as “a study of meanings: a search for the ‘deep story’ of the Lasallian tradition, how this founding story and vision is developed, nurtured, sustained, and transmitted to others, brought into conversation with the contemporary world, and embodied in individuals and/or cultures as an expression of charism” (22). In order to do this study Ryan makes use of Bernard Lee’s concept of practical theology and Thomas Groome’s “shared Christian praxis” and utilizes a qualitative methodology using focus groups (three schools, each with a focus group of students and a focus group of teachers, staff, and administrators for a total of six focus groups). He notes that this methodology presents several limitations, including the inherent bias of his serving as researcher and the nature of the questions posed for discussion and synthesis. His research questions are threefold: What is Lasallian charism? How is Lasallian charism experienced? How can Lasallian schools nurture and sustain an authentic expression of the founding charism?

As noted above, Chapter 1 offers a thorough and well-documented investigation of the concept of charism: its scriptural and theological foundations (especially as seen through the writings of Saint Paul), its historical and theological development in the Church, and the current understanding of charism in Vatican Council II and post-Vatican Council II documents. What then follows is a view of charism through Lee’s socio-historical critique. Ryan introduces the concept of “the deep story” – the deep story being the means by which the charismatic tradition is “historically extended and socially embodied” (52). This is what is required for a religious group’s charism to be an authentic and contemporary expression of the deep story, the deep story of its Christian and religious, in this case Lasallian, heritage.

Chapter 2 offers the reader an overview of the Lasallian founding story, particularly through tracing key points in the life of the Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools (hence Lasallian), Saint John Baptist de La Salle. Chapter 3 focuses on the central elements of the

Lasallian charism. The two chapters taken together paint in broad brush strokes the components of Lasallian charism and identity as currently lived out in educational establishments. As it were, the rich Lasallian heritage. Ryan's summary of key Lasallian elements, drawn from the life and writings of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, provides a clear and succinct compendium of Lasallian research in this area. He notes in his summary of the key characteristics or values of the Lasallian educational mission that these "key values expressed in such a schema, expressing as they do, aspects of the Lasallian deep story, allow those involved in the Lasallian educational mission today, to bring the deep story expressed via these values into conversation with today's most pressing needs and aspirations, allowing charism to be incarnated in the Lasallian school" (91). The schema he offers is that of the Five Core Lasallian Principles used by a variety of educational institutions in the English-speaking Lasallian world.

In Chapter 4 Ryan presents his findings, in this case, "understandings" that emerge through his analysis and synthesis of the responses of the focus groups. In dealing with the groups as one set of data (data from students and data from teachers, staff, and administrators), he is able to offer "emerging themes" responding to the three research questions. Five themes emerge from the question "What is Lasallian charism?" They are: a community of family and faith, a way of living the values of the Gospel, a concern for the poor and social justice, gathered around the life and vision of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, and relevant to the contemporary world (104). Five themes also emerge from the question "How is the Lasallian charism experienced?" They are: symbols and rituals, stories, role models, experiences of service and justice, and connections with the wider Lasallian community (117). The third research question "How can Lasallian schools nurture and sustain an authentic expression of the founding charism?" yields three emerging themes: formation of staff and students, enculturation and internalization of the Lasallian charism, and charism-centered leaders/leadership to promote charism (127). Each of the thirteen emerging themes is addressed in detail with appropriate examples of comments shared and practices in place.

Chapter 5 explains the method proposed by Ryan for effectively weaving "the educational community's deep story and its engagement with the contemporary world, to give rise to an expression of charism" (140). He notes that this methodology is new for the English-speaking Lasallian world. The advantage of this *Method for Nurturing Lasallian Charism (MNLC)* is that it creates a process for on-going dialogue between heritage (Lasallian heritage in this case) and an ever-changing world of new needs, new realities, and new circumstances (both internal and external pressures on an institution). Modeled on the work of Arbuckle, Murphy, Groome, and Murray (142), the *MNLC* posits these four stages of action: 1) a focusing act that engages the school community with the contemporary world and the needs of the time and how culture and wider society impacts on the theme or issue identified; 2) the identification of aspects of the school community's deep story that is pertinent to the theme or issue; 3) identifying what conforms with the charism through a disciplined conversation that integrates the deep story with the needs of the times; and 4) implementing a plan that nurtures and sustains charism (142-143). Ryan provides details for each of the stages noted.

Ryan offers six conclusions as a result of his study: 1) charism can only be nurtured and sustained when an educational community is profoundly formed in their deep story – their unique way of living the Gospel – in ways that are faithful to the signs of the times and the needs

of their culture (158); 2) the Lasallian charism provides Lasallian educational communities an identity that people wish to be associated with (159); 3) the effective nurturing and sustaining of charism is that charism must be both identifiable and observable (160); 4) the primary experience of the Lasallian charism occurs in and through community (160); 5) if a charism is to be nurtured and sustained in an educational community, there is a need to cultivate school leaders who are committed to fostering the charism, who understand it, and who are role models for its authentic expression (161); and, 6) there are a number of factors that lead to the creation of a positive school environment, together with structures and formation experiences that support and nurture charism (162).

Ryan's study is a welcome addition to a growing body of Lasallian literature aimed at how to preserve, strengthen, and ensure the continuance of the Lasallian charism in Lasallian educational ministries. The unique contribution of Ryan's work is that his study is not simply descriptive of what currently exists nor does it propose a series of actions to be taken (though many specific actions can be gleaned from his work). Rather, the *MNLC* model offers a practical tool to nurture the Lasallian charism in whatever type of educational or social service ministry that calls itself Lasallian. Although he does not point to ways in which his research could be furthered, one can assume that similar focus group qualitative research efforts at other levels of education, e.g., Lasallian higher education, could be used to identify emerging themes around the same research questions. In addition, the *MNLC* model could be used and its impact measured.

Ryan's research is theoretically sound in its laying out of the meaning of charism and Lasallian charism in particular, and is of practical use, both in its focus group design and the model of engaging "deep story," pressing current needs and circumstances as well as charism in a framework of on-going dialogue. Theory and praxis are well explored in this research.