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ANNOTATION

French, Michael, FSC. “The Lasallian Volunteer Program: Mentoring, Mutuality, Discipleship.” D.Min. dissertation, Catholic Theological Union, 2000, 210 pp.

Thirteen years into what is now a three-decade-old national program of educational service, Michael French, FSC, gives us a glimpse of a wonderful adventure of mentoring, mutuality and discipleship. Brother Michael’s work “explores the challenges which arise in the Lasallian Volunteer Program in which post-college young people live in community with Brothers of the Christian Schools and do ministry alongside them in various works” (vii). As part of his introduction to this adventure, five images lay the foundation: feet (*physical act of going*), hands (*do some kind of work*), eyes (*opening up*), heart (*identify with felt compassion/solidarity and learn from others*), and mind (*understand and combat unjust systems*) (13-14).

After a general introduction in which Brother Michael outlines his observations regarding the experience of volunteers and Brothers and aims at determining the presence of mentoring, mutuality and discipleship, his project is divided into three thematically structured sections. First he presents the results of research on several aspects of United States culture, e.g. individualism and generation theory (52-75); the Catholic Church’s understanding of lay ministry since the Second Vatican Council (75-84); and Lasallian Spirituality (85-104). Next he argues the need for training for transition (111-138) and for theological reflection for both volunteers and Brothers (139-150). Lastly, he suggests the use of an adapted model of theological reflection as well as a re-framing and re-naming of what is being done in order to connect it to the broader Christian tradition (151-174) and ends with some concluding remarks.

Having carefully constructed a system of interviewing lay volunteers and Brothers, a discussion follows that covers a wide range of interacting dynamics. The initial stage includes motivations, expectations and training. Next the various dimensions of mutuality, age differences and mentoring are carefully identified almost in checklist order from inquiry to lived experience. Lastly, issues of integration and conflict are honestly addressed as a rich source of reflection on the day-to-day realities of community and ministry. Brother Michael informs this discussion by using a wide array of contemporary social scientists, post-Vatican II theological reflection and the richness of our three-century Lasallian tradition. Many of these insights come together in such a coherent and developmental way that the reader can only be struck by the close fitting dynamics of each area for their unique contributions. Most notable among these foundations is the all-too-brief discussion on De La Salle’s cornerstone for ministerial spirituality most clearly set forth in the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* (98-104). Following the outstanding overview of our American culture, generations, emerging Lay Ministry, the challenges of Vatican II and contemporary Lasallian Spirituality with a supplement of “stories”, the reader can only marvel at the richness found in the Volunteer Program, then and now.

In Chapter Three, Brother Michael develops the five previously noted foundational images as embodied actions (113) with all their rewards and demands and he focuses the reader’s attention

on three metaphors: moving into a community, ministry and neighborhood. For example, with respect to “feet”, there is a candid discussion of the multiple levels of give-and-take that make-up a healthy community lifestyle (114-119). Issues are addressed from complex interpersonal skills to mundane chores like food shopping. The five images become a series of meditations on the human condition, particularly among the poor, with a series of mini-experiences and related questions that are particular to the volunteer experience but also for anyone who walks the walk (126). Cleverly, Brother Michael connects the experience of De La Salle inviting the first school teachers into his family home with all its obvious disconnects between rich and popular classes to the emerging volunteer program (134-137). Like the first Brothers, volunteers more often than not find themselves in a kind of no man’s land. Who are these volunteers? What is their place in ministry? How do they “fit” into community? What is their understanding of mission? Where is this newness leading?

To begin a response to these questions, Brother Michael places before his readers a series of biblical images that serve as meditative icons. The stories of the Exodus (140-144), of Tobias and Raphael (144-145) and hospitality/breaking bread (145-146) serve to make it clear that the volunteers and Brothers ground their understanding of God’s responses to the above questions as being found in the things of everyday life. The remaining quarter of Brother Michael’s project moves beyond the aforementioned questions to a series of author-identified issues that are as relevant today as they were fifteen years ago when this project was first undertaken: training and transitioning with its many sub-topics of inculturation, leaving home, starting a new life and beginning a professional life, moving out (147-150). The most relevant for today’s ministry of Lasallian higher education are what the author identifies as training for meaning making, training for change (with its unique paradigm), training for ritual, training for mutuality and finally, but by no means least, training for our life together (151-175). Once again all five are developed in a neatly woven tapestry of social scientists, contemporary Catholicism and Lasallian heritage.

As one reads this work one cannot help but think of the hundreds of lay men, lay women and Brothers who have continued to shape the Lasallian Volunteer Program (LVP) since this paper was written by Brother Michael. When thinking about the LVP, the author powerfully reminds us I “caught myself looking beyond it to the future. As in any transition point, the end of this project is already the beginning of another, although just what the next project might be is hard to say now” (185). Perhaps contemporary Lasallian higher education can continue the conversation by addressing the interactive dynamics found in the midst of mentoring, mutuality and discipleship as we undertake our common ministry “together and by association.” Let us affirm Brother Michael’s insight that “the spark has been set by the Spirit through the charism of John Baptist de La Salle in the Brothers, but it has been tended by all involved, especially by the directors of the program” (189). As the Lasallian Volunteer Program moves into the future it would be wise to recall the words of Saint Pope John XXIII, “See everything. Comment on little and correct even less” and the words of Saint John Baptist de la Salle, “The work is Yours.”