

McGuinness, Margaret. Annotation of “Let Us Bear Witness to the Reign of God: Reimagining Lasallian Education and Evangelization in the Name of Justice.” *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 7, no. 3 (Institute for Lasallian Studies at Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota: 2016).

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ANNOTATION

Miller, Ernest J., Jr., FSC “Let Us Bear Witness to the Reign of God: Reimagining Lasallian Education and Evangelization in the Name of Justice” DMin dissertation, The Catholic Theological Union, Chicago, Illinois. 2015. 222 pp.

Brother Ernest J. Miller, FSC’s doctor of ministry dissertation, examines two aspects of “the charism and mission John Baptist de La Salle and his first Brothers established by listening to the movement of the Holy Spirit” (vii). Miller’s goal is to “analyze and affirm the corresponding relationship between the commitment to education in faith and the promotion of justice in Lasallian education and evangelization today” (vii). In addition to the five main chapters, an introduction offers some preliminary definitions and discusses the methodology used in the study. Miller also explains his own interest in this particular topic, noting that the thesis grew out of his “persistent personal quest to tie together [his] religious orientation and democratic hopes” (6).

Chapter one, entitled “Reaching the Peripheries: Living Today the Founding Story,” examines “the text and context of two perennial axes of Lasallian pedagogy, that is, educating in faith (religious education and catechesis) and the promotion of justice” (19). In December 1967, Miller explains, the Brothers of the Christian Schools issued *The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today: A Declaration*. This document discussed the importance of the legacy of De La Salle, reading the signs of the times in the spirit of Vatican II, and the place of religious instruction in Lasallian education. It is clear that there is more to the work of Christian education than religious instruction, and De La Salle himself “did not make a sharp distinction between teaching the religion lesson and teaching secular subjects” (23). In addition, the *Declaration* drew on Catholic social teaching, especially the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* and Paul VI’s encyclical *Populorum Progressio*. A subsequent document, Circular 412, *The Educational Service of the Poor and the Promotion of Justice*, issued in 1980, asserts that “. . . in the name of the Gospel, then . . . [we] must commit ourselves to serving [those who are] poor” (35). The Brothers’ commitment to education and the promotion of justice was recognized when they received the Noma Literacy Prize in 1990. During the latter half of the twentieth and the first decades of the twenty-first centuries, Superior Generals have reaffirmed the congregation’s commitment to education and the promotion of justice.

After explaining the way in which the Brothers of the Christian Schools have read the signs of the times in order to interpret John Baptist de La Salle’s vision in light of the contemporary world, Miller reports on the study he conducted of religion classes offered in three Lasallian secondary schools. How are secondary schools, he asks, educating in faith and promoting justice? His fieldwork included observing classes while taking copious notes, and interviews with teachers; Miller followed-up his interviews with email “conversations.” Preparations for this work consisted of reviewing foundational documents, mission statements, syllabi, and

curriculum maps. As the author readily admits, there are limitations to his observations. It was not possible within this context, for instance, to take into account the range of academic abilities present in each classroom.

As one might expect, Miller found that there were a variety of ways in which class material was conveyed to students. Some teachers talked at students; others relied on small group discussions; and still others attempted to generate debate among students in the class. Miller's critique of service-learning trips is especially important because he notes "little or no evidence is available [to indicate] that the history of these immersion trips had led to meaningful or long-term changes *that could not otherwise be accomplished*" (79). His observations led him to conclude that service-learning at these Lasallian secondary schools is more about service than "a social-justice orientation to service."

In chapter three, Miller initiates a conversation between Lasallian philosophy and praxis and the educational philosophies of Dwayne Huebner, Suzanne Toton, and Henry Giroux in order to understand "how the concepts of critical pedagogy can be applied to the married tasks of educating in faith and promoting justice" (89). Huebner is convinced that education is God's enterprise, not a human activity (102). "Indeed," Miller writes, "Huebner calls for educators to follow the way of John the Baptist, shouting out in the cultural wilderness to prepare the way for God's mighty deeds" (104). Teaching, therefore, is a vocation; it is about much more than method and technology. Suzanne Toton is "committed to educating in faith for justice and advocating for social change" (107). Her work has focused on the necessity of institutions and individuals orienting themselves towards solidarity and social transformation. According to Toton, one must do more than simply promote the idea of justice; we must participate in its creation. Educational theorist Henry Giroux has helped to shape "critical thinking about education and society" (118). "Education," for Giroux (and others), "functions as a constitutive dimension for creating a democratic public in which freedom and justice flourishes for all" (120-121). Examining the work of Huebner, Toton, and Giroux, Miller believes, offers new ideas as "we struggle to reimagine Lasallian education and evangelization in the name of justice" (126).

Miller's next chapter "tap[s] the vital connection of doing theological reflection in light of the two perennial axes of the Lasallian tradition for the sake of Lasallian praxis" (129). Sharing faith, he claims, is a central feature of Lasallian education. Religious education and catechesis do not end, however, when one graduates from a Catholic secondary school or university, so teachers must prepare their students to continue to struggle with what, for Miller, is a fundamental question: "What is the quality of your service to the 25th chapter of Matthew's Gospel?" (135) To be more specific, how do we answer this question and remain faithful to De La Salle's vision of religious education? Miller emphasizes that the hermeneutical lens "that carries forward the missional aspirations of the Brothers of the Christian Schools" is the reign of God. (135) If we educate in faith towards liberating salvation (cf. Thomas Groome), then we can shape a curriculum based on this idea. According to Miller, De La Salle demonstrated "apostolic sensitiveness" to the world around him as he moved from "commitment to commitment" (140). The practice of theological discernment, as put forth by Miguel Campos, FSC, "provides a rigorous practical theological basis for which lines of inquiry for missional aspirations might be advanced" (142).

The final chapter of Miller's dissertation suggests Lasallian educators should enter into a critical dialogue on two issues: uncovering De La Salle's vision of educating in faith "that is critically appropriated for fullness of life," and recollecting the "enduring Lasallian commitment to the promotion of justice" (160). It is important to note that Miller is not attempting to put forth a "comprehensive treatment of Christian religious education and catechesis for Lasallian schools," but is interested primarily in educating for justice (166). In addition, he does not propose a specific curriculum, but offers a way to develop an educational philosophy that allows the long Lasallian tradition to dialogue with scholars in the field of Christian religious education, Catholic social teaching, and critical pedagogy (168). In the second-half of the chapter, Miller explains that, of course, Lasallians are not able to focus on every form of human suffering. The Brothers of the Christian Schools, however, are able to establish priorities in light of their founding purpose, "to serve children and young people, through the mission field of Christian education" (182). Noting that the Lasallian world has often been criticized for having somewhat less than a "robust public voice," he urges a more intense commitment to advocacy on the part of Lasallian educators and the Brothers of the Christian Schools (183).

"Let Us Bear Witness to the Reign of God" ends with Miller reminding us of the importance of Circular 412, *The Educational Service of the Poor and the Promotion of Justice*. The key word in the title, he notes, is *and*; educational evangelization *and* the promotion of justice are both important. All Lasallians are called to bring the Good News to all people and to work to change unjust societal structures.