

Germundsen, Richard. Annotation of “St. John Baptist De La Salle, 1651-1719, and Transformational Leadership in Education.” by Richard Burke. Ph.D. dissertation, Gonzaga University, 1995. *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 3, no. 3 (Institute for Lasallian Studies at Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota: 2012).

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## ANNOTATION

Burke, Richard. “St. John Baptist De La Salle, 1651-1719, and Transformational Leadership in Education.” Ph.D. dissertation, Gonzaga University, 1995, 151 pp.

Richard Burke applies qualitative methodology to his dissertation study in effort to analyze the leadership displayed by John Baptist De La Salle across the span of his life’s work. Using a modern theoretical lens, Burke’s research question seeks to determine if De La Salle demonstrated the following five characteristics of a transformational leader:

- articulating a vision
- empowering others
- satisfying higher needs
- introducing change, and
- maintaining high performance in expectations.

This depiction of a unique leadership approach is built from the original works of James MacGregor Burns (1978) and Bernard Bass (1985). The view is further informed by subsequent major leadership scholars who have added their elaborations. Burke applies his analysis to a set of data including De La Salle’s letters and other writings that characterize the charism of the Institute at its beginning; biographies by De La Salle’s contemporaries; and later scholarly works by others on the saint. Burke, from his vantage point in 1995, posits, “Although largely forgotten and overlooked today, St. John Baptist De La Salle ranks as a pioneer of modern education” (1). Furthermore, “it is only right and appropriate that his undertakings and performance be rediscovered and assessed in the light of recent debates on leadership” (4).

Burke opens his dissertation by placing De La Salle into his French social and political climate in an attempt to ground readers in a specific historical context. This purview acquaints us with the provisions for education that existed at the time and it details the challenges that religious orders faced in their attempts to bring about more inclusive popular education. He also steers the reader’s attention to the concepts of charisma and charism.

The author assembles a literature review purposed to accomplish several goals. It first sets out to review the difficulties associated with defining leadership and the attempts of recognized leadership scholars to do so. In regard to this intent Burke concludes, “there is no concise single definition of leadership which applies to every situation, and in general, examples of several definitions can be found in various settings” (30). Where a universal definition fails, the author then moves on to an overview of prevailing theories of leadership and highlights the features of the transformational approach. The literature review next enumerates primary and secondary sources by which to meet with the ideas and influence of De La Salle on 17<sup>th</sup>-century French society.

Burke's chapter on his methodology suggests he attempted to undertake a critical inquiry via a systematic examination of De La Salle. He, alone, screened the primary and secondary data (read from translations) to determine if there was evidence of the five characteristics listed previously. As to his research limitations, he discloses he only applied the transformational lens of leadership to his analysis of the Founder. Today, qualitative techniques might be enhanced with the use of a detailed analysis rubric, a current panel of experts from leadership studies and/or Lasallian studies to screen the data as co-researchers, or a focus group discussion analyzing De La Salle's specific decisions or activities, to name just a few techniques.

The fourth chapter re-tells the Founder's life story and details his career. This presentation will be useful to those yet unacquainted with John Baptist De La Salle and the major actors of his life and times. However, Burke's primary contribution to Lasallian scholarship is found in the dissertation's fifth chapter where he pinpoints the transformational leadership aspects of De La Salle's efforts to improve education and bind together the group that became the Brothers of the Christian Schools. This is an original approach that helps today's reader uncover a new perspective on De La Salle's contributions. He recommends additional study of the Founder's role as an instructional leader, as well as explorations of the transformational activities of other leading figures from the history of education.

Burke concludes his dissertation by stating that, "De La Salle had all the qualities and characteristics of a transformational leader" (130) as described by the major leadership scholars of the 1970-80s.

Through this vision he was instrumental in implementing change by setting up an extensive educational structure, and because of an appealing charisma and effective communication, he inspired devoted and enthusiastic followers to carry out his ideals with patience and perseverance. Many were empowered, authority was delegated, and pride and ownership accrued (130-131).

Burke's dissertation has pointed researchers to a new compass heading that may inspire future Lasallian studies honing in on leadership topics. In what ways was leadership within the Institute different from that exercised by other religious orders of the time? Was De La Salle's leadership approach only transformational? In what ways did he display transactional, leader/member exchange, or other techniques of leadership? What of the Superior Generals that followed as leaders of the Institute; might they provide interesting case studies based on the times and events through which they served? How are previous Lasallian formation experiences engendering current leadership from participants? How is the leadership displayed by current leaders in specific schools of the Christian Brothers viewed by faculty, staff, students, or parents? Do stakeholder preferences for leadership change from the elementary educational level to higher education levels, from impoverished school settings to advantaged settings, from culture to culture, or nation to nation?