

The Lasallian Mystique Then and Now

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When Br. William, President, invited me to make a presentation at this Convocation he asked me to submit a title I would be using. I proposed the title of a talk given by a renowned professor at the University of Paris in 1350, which in Latin was *De omnibus pluribus, et quisbusdam aliis, Concerning all things, and certain other matters*, but Br. William consulted his administrative team and they rejected this as being too narrow a topic. They wanted something about our Lasallian tradition so I recommended "The Lasallian Mystique Then and Now." This was accepted. I asked about the length of the presentation and Br. William told me about fifty or sixty minutes. When I complained, "How can I say all I know about the Lasallian tradition in fifty minutes?" he calmly replied, "Speak slowly!"

About the title:

Lasallian is a term that has gained world-wide currency in the international Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools – the word comes from a person, John Baptist de La Salle – the Brothers honor him as their Founder, the Catholic Church honors him as a saint – canonized by Pope Benedict XIII in 1900 – and proclaimed as the "Patron of All Teachers of Youth," by Pope Pius XII in 1950.

By *Mystique* I refer to a culture of convictions and practices surrounding a certain vision, a way of life with distinctive characteristics.

By *Then* I mean the time of the founding of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools by John Baptist de La Salle in the last quarter of the 17th century, based on certain educational and spiritual principles and directives.

By *Now* I mean how the vision and mission of the beginning of the Institute continue today to inspire the educational work of education centers that call themselves Lasallian in more than eighty countries all over the world. This worldwide extension of De La Salle's initiative has provided opportunities to apply his vision to new times and new circumstances. The Institute's educational services are offered in developed countries as well as in countries that are extremely poor – to thousands of students of all religious affiliations – Catholics, Orthodox, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and those with no religious affiliation.

The creative vision of De La Salle has survived for more than 300 years and inspires Brothers and their colleagues in an international network of educational institutions that De La Salle could never have imagined. Saint Mary's University is part of this Lasallian network.

Beyond the Boundaries

For a few comments about De La Salle's vision I begin with the title of a historical novel on the life and work of John Baptist de La Salle written by the late Br. Leo Burkhard, a native of Denver, Colorado. Br. Leo spent much of his life in France teaching and working on important Lasallian projects. I was privileged to have him as a teacher in my Freshman year in high school

and to have spent many happy times with him in France. Br. Leo gave a clever title to his first book on the life of John Baptist de La Salle namely, *Master of Mischief Makers* for it referred to De La Salle's effort through the schools to educate wayward young boys of the working class and the poor, but the title also suggests that De La Salle himself was a mischief maker because of his unconventional innovative efforts to establish these schools. *Beyond the Boundaries*, published in 1994, is an expanded edition of this earlier book.

In getting involved in what was to become the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools De La Salle went beyond many boundaries of his time:

- Family boundaries – he crossed the boundaries expected by his well-to-do family. He associated himself with a group of young men recruited to be teachers by an individual sent to De La Salle's home town of Rheims by a wealthy woman, a distant relative of De La Salle. These recruits were from the lower classes, barely educated, uncouth – De La Salle incurred the bitter recrimination of his family for bringing these young men into the family manor for meals. He moved into a house with them and most of his family disowned him. He eventually gave up all his wealth and entered personally on the path of poverty and discipline he designed initially for the young teachers.
- Ecclesiastical boundaries – De La Salle was headed for a high clerical position, possibly a bishopric. Being a canon of the Reims cathedral he was among the elite group of clergy. Despite wide and powerful ecclesiastical pressure he gave up his canonry to devote his time fully to the new community of school teachers. He also crossed the boundaries of ecclesiastical control by not confining his schools to the control of the local pastor of any one parish and refusing to have an ecclesiastical superior for the community.
- Societal boundaries – at the time of De La Salle one's status in society was seen as willed by God, and therefore the poor should be resigned to their condition of poverty. In contrast to this, the mission of De La Salle's new community of teachers was to remove the children of the working class and poor from that menial condition through a Christian and human education.
- Educational boundaries – De La Salle saw there was a great need to be addressed, namely schooling for the young boys of the working class and the poor. He knew this could not be done properly within the existing school structures. He rejected and revised many of the pedagogical practices of the time by having classes taught in French rather than Latin, by introducing a practical curriculum suited to the needs of the working class and poor rather than the usual course of studies preparing for university classes, by introducing a group-centered method of teaching instead of the individual method used at the time, by encouraging student participation in the running of the school in a number of ways (student inspectors, tutors, prayer monitors, bell ringers, and other responsibilities). De La Salle insisted that the children should not be considered as pupils, but as "disciples" for whom the teacher is a model to be followed. He substituted the traditional title "Master" for "Brother" to

characterize the educational relationship of teacher to student that he envisioned, that of firmness and gentleness of a big brother to a younger brother.

In his schools De La Salle wanted no discrimination, in contrast to the custom in many schools of the time. All students, rich and poor, intelligent and less intelligent were to be treated with equal care and vigilance.

- Religious life boundaries – in place of the traditional school teacher who worked in isolation, De La Salle substituted a teaching community, where teaching was “together and by association.” By having only laymen in the community, without the traditional vows of religious life, and by not seeking official approbation either from Rome or the State De La Salle crossed the boundaries of traditional forms of the protocol of religious life of the time.

Br. Leo Burkhard ends his book *Beyond the Boundaries* with De La Salle saying, “If we can open the minds of the children, if we can lead them beyond the boundaries that enslave them, then the world will become a brighter place, and people will live closer to justice, closer to happiness, and closer to peace.”

This is the “then” part of the title of this presentation, the beginnings of the Lasallian “mystique” The “now” part is the challenge to continue to go “beyond the boundaries” in the life and work of the Institute today. Those who accept this challenge should consider themselves “blessed.” And this word “blessed” leads to the next phase of my remarks.

A group of teachers, lay and members of religious orders, attending a renewal weekend organized by an archdiocese in Malaysia in 1991 compiled a list of eight reasons why teachers are blessed and used the title “Beatitudes For Teachers.” I found this list in a desk in my room at the Brothers’ residence in Karachi, Pakistan where I was staying for a few days when I was Provincial of the New Orleans-Santa Fe District visiting Brothers in that area. After reading it I told myself, De La Salle could have written this. It remarkably captures his vision, his “mystique.”

Beatitudes For Teachers (Beatitudes: Greek meaning, Happy, How Fortunate)

Teachers refers to all who serve the educational mission of the institution – teachers are classroom teachers, counselors, coaches, mentors, custodians, food service workers, registrars, admission staff, housing personnel, administrative assistants, secretaries, physical plant and grounds staff, even top level administrators. All who contribute to the smooth functioning and operation of the institution and further its mission are teachers, and learning occurs in the classroom and out of the classroom.

1. *Blessed are you who are called to teach, for you walk in the footsteps of the Master.*

In the Gospels the title “Teacher” (Rabbi, Rabbouni) is applied to Jesus far more than any other. It is interesting and informative to see the contexts in which Jesus is called “Teacher” – to name only a few:

- A scribe approached Jesus and said “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go” (Mt 8.19) – Andrew and Simon Peter asked Jesus “Teacher, where are you staying?” Jesus said, “Come and see” – they followed Jesus and became disciples.
A teacher is one who attracts disciples, is a model to follow.
- Jesus often sat at table to dine with outcasts and sinners – some Pharisees asked his disciples “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” (Mt 9.11)
A teacher is one who shows compassion for the marginalized, who extends forgiveness to those who “stray from the path of righteousness.”
- Someone in a crowd listening to Jesus exclaimed “Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; he foams, grinds his teeth, and becomes rigid” – Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand (Mk 9.17)
A teacher is one who is a healer.
- Jesus washes the feet of his disciples and tells them “You call me Teacher – and you are right for that is what I am...you also ought to wash one another’s feet” (John 13.14). In one of his reflections addressed to his community of teachers De La Salle tells them about the washing of the feet: “Jesus Christ, speaking to his apostles, told them that he gave an example to them that they might do as he himself had done. This is also what you must do” (MTR 196.2).
A teacher is one who serves others.

As teachers we are called upon to be models others will follow, to be compassionate, to be healers, to be of service to others – in whatever capacity we serve in the institution.

2. Blessed are you who sow peace and harmony in the staff room, yours will be the joy of the Lord.

The work of education brings together a very diverse group of persons. For a school (university) to be a true educational community there must be an attitude of communion and solidarity among the members of the community, when they meet at different times in the staff room, faculty lounge and other places. These gatherings should reflect bonds of personal appreciation, mutual support, respect, collaboration, co-responsibility. It is a time to relax, to congratulate each other for various accomplishments, for telling one another “thank you,” not a time to complain about a class or a student, or a colleague, or the administration. The teachers provide the model for the students and generate a culture of peace and harmony that is experienced and fostered by all in the institution. The staff room, as someone once suggested, has vents that circulate throughout the institution what transpires in that room!

An expression De La Salle put in the Brothers’ vow formula from the beginning of the Institute (1694 formula) and which remains in the formula to the present day is that we conduct schools “together and by association.” “Together” means that we are materially present in the same workplace, and “by association” means that we carry out our tasks in an attitude of common vision and in solidarity with one another

3. *Blessed are you who plant seeds of hope in youthful hearts, for they yearn for the coming of my kingdom.*

De La Salle realized how great was the need at his time for schools for the young boys of the working class and the poor. He reminded the Brothers that the parents of these boys were taken up with daily concerns and care of their family, under the constant anxiety of earning the necessities of life for themselves and their children (MTR 196.2). Because of that the children live on their own in a vicious cycle of unemployment, idleness, and vice with no sense of self-worth, dignity, or any future worth dreaming about. De La Salle wanted to plant seeds of hope in them through the establishment of schools that would be accessible and meaningful for them. Because of his fundamental faith in a God who wants all to be saved, De La Salle wanted the children to have hope of salvation, not just in the hereafter but now – how can there be hope for salvation in the after life if there is no experience of hope and salvation now?

What kind of hope do young people have today? Is it only material accumulation, instant gratification, winning at all costs? How can we inspire hope in our students in all of the educational services of the institution – hope for living, not just for themselves but for others as well? What seeds of hope can we plant in the hearts of our students?

The expression in the Gospels “kingdom of heaven” is somewhat obscure and unclear – but seeing it in the contexts in which the expression is used it is clear that the “kingdom of heaven/God” means the reign of justice, peace, liberation, love – this is what our students yearn for, even when this is disguised under other forms of their yearnings.

4. *Blessed are you when you share your faith with others, for your name is written in my heart.*

It is under the sign of faith that De La Salle wanted his Brothers to live and under which the schools should be conducted. He did not mean a purely speculative intellectual faith but a faith that is expressed in zeal in our educational ministry. In his writings De La Salle was clear that faith should be the light and guide of all Christians.

The Spirit of Faith and Zeal, which is the Spirit of the Institute, is that faith as applied to the work of education. As already mentioned, for De La Salle faith is the firm conviction that God is a saving God who wants all to be saved, now and in the hereafter. That is the purpose and the challenge of an institution that calls itself Lasallian – to be a saving place, a place where all involved in the institution can experience salvation in many different ways...salvation from the limitations of ignorance, from prejudice, from discrimination, from selfishness, from lack of hope, from anxiety, from harmful behavior, from despondency, from lack of self-esteem, from difficult family situations...

5. *Blessed are you who anguish now because your students are difficult, for one day they will thank you for your loving concern.*

Some of you have already experienced this – students who come back to thank you for putting up with them when they were disagreeable and nasty in the classroom, in the registrar’s office, on the playing field, at the reception desk, in the residence halls.

Students can be difficult through ingratitude, insubordination, lack of courtesy, lack of attention in class, etc. This can cause anguish for educators – but we are blessed if our anguish can be transformed into loving concern, instead of harshness, cynicism, sarcasm, contempt, neglect.

This loving concern translates into correction when appropriate. De La Salle wrote that “Correction of the pupils is one of the most important things which takes place in schools and to it one must pay great attention in order for it to be timely and beneficial” (CE 140).

In his writings De La Salle insists that teachers should not remain indifferent in the presence of wrongdoing. The guiding consideration is that correction should not be primarily punitive but should be to put the student back on the right path of good order. He insists that the teacher should never lose self-control when correcting, should not correct to restore perceived compromised personal authority, should not act out of anger. With respect to the student the aim is not simply concern for exterior behavior but interior change in the student – and if correction is done properly, says De La Salle, the student will show gratitude! (MTR 204.3; CE)

The challenge is not only reflection on our personal approach when confronting a difficult student, but also a review of disciplinary procedures of the institution as a whole, outlined in the faculty, staff, and student handbooks, and procedures governing disciplinary committees, and the like.

6. *Blessed are you when efficiency gives way to compassion for the deeper secret of education is yours.*

The “deeper secret” of education is not efficiency in the classroom or out of the classroom in various offices, but compassion. The striking expression De La Salle uses for the deeper secret of education is “touching hearts” – “You carry out a work that requires you to touch hearts...” (Med 43.3; “Do you have a faith that is such that it is able to touch the hearts of your students and inspire them with the Christian spirit? This is the greatest miracle you could perform and the one that God asks of you, for this is the purpose of your work” (Med 139.2).

This is the “deeper secret” of education, the inner transformation that takes place in the students that ultimately leads them to take over mapping out their own journey of learning.

Our Lasallian centers of learning must not be perceived as diploma mills, but as centers of learners where the transforming power of education takes place for the personal development of the potential of the students and for promoting purposeful engagement in the world.

7. *Blessed are you when you reach out to me in your students, for you will surely find me and rejoice.*

Just as De La Salle wants the students to see Jesus Christ in their teachers, so too he wants the teachers to see Jesus Christ in their students. He says in a meditation for the end of the school year, “You must act as representing Jesus Christ himself, he wants your disciples to see him in you...” (Med 195.2). And, in a memorable phrase in a reflection on the Feast of the Three Kings who went to Bethlehem and paid homage to Jesus as a child in the manger, De La Salle says to his teachers, “Recognize Jesus beneath the poor rags of the children whom you have to teach” (Med 96.3). Speaking of Saint Dominic’s great compassion for the poor, De La Salle tells his

teachers to imitate this saint and that “Jesus Christ will look upon the good you do to the poor as done to himself” (Med 150.1).

In all of this De La Salle applies to students in the schools the vivid judgment scene described in Mt 25 where Jesus Christ says to those on his right hand to come into eternal happiness for when they took care of those who were hungry or thirsty or naked or sick or in prison they did it to him.

As educators we are called to reach out to our students, especially to those most in need, to those who seem to be lost. In his meditation on the Good Shepherd in John’s Gospel (Ch. 10), De La Salle tells his teachers they must reach out to their students with mildness toward some, firmness toward others – some need to be reprovved for their faults, others must be constantly watched over to prevent them from being lost or going astray (Med 33.1).

In a meditation for the end of the school year De La Salle writes, “Consider Jesus Christ as the Good Shepherd of the Gospel who seeks the lost sheep, places it upon his shoulders, and carries it back to restore it to the fold. Since you are taking his place, look upon yourself as obliged to do the same thing (MTR 195.1).

The Lasallian spirit demands that in all of our duties in school we reach out in a special way to the needy – and this is also a responsibility for the institution as a whole. An inventory of how this happens here at Saint Mary’s through its financial aid policies, outreach programs, and the like would be a useful discussion periodically.

8. *Blessed are you who lead young people in the paths of justice and peace, for you will shine like stars for all eternity.*

Education plays an important role in breaking down barriers of prejudice, oppression, discrimination, indignity. The educational community envisioned by De La Salle is one that has absolutely no compromise when it comes to injustice of any kind.

In a bold association, De La Salle compares the establishment of the Christian Schools, a name he gave to the schools he founded, to the birth of Jesus, the Incarnation. Just as Jesus was on earth to bring God’s reign of justice and peace among people, so too this is the purpose of the schools, to be witnesses of justice and peace and to promote justice and peace in the world by preparing students for that.

The expression “shine like stars for all eternity” is taken from the Old Testament Book of Daniel 12 where we read that those who lead many to righteousness will enjoy eternal happiness. De La Salle uses this expression in his final meditation for the end of the school year when he graphically describes the joy that will be shared by the students and teachers. He writes, “In heaven those who instruct many persons in Christian justice will shine like stars throughout all eternity. They will shine, indeed, in the midst of those whom they have instructed, who will eternally bear witness to the great gratitude they have for so many instructions they have received from their teachers, whom they will regard as the cause, after God, of their salvation. What a sharing of joy there will be between the teachers and their disciples!” (MTR 208.2).

Furthermore, he writes, “In heaven the students will represent the good you have done among them...all of them will join their voices to obtain for you a favorable judgment from Jesus Christ...and the zeal of their teachers for their salvation will be made public before all people! (Med 208.3)

Noteworthy here is the pattern of salvation De La Salle describes. On the one hand, the teachers work to procure the salvation of the students, and on the other hand, the students are the cause of the salvation of the teachers.

This is what led De La Salle to the striking conviction that in fulfilling their duties in the schools the teachers will work out their own salvation. In another meditation for the time of retreat De La Salle writes, “Devote yourself with zeal and affection to your work, for it will be one of the most helpful ways to assure your salvation (MTR 207.1). In commenting on the state and employment of his community of teachers De La Salle, in a striking observation, states clearly “Do not distinguish between the duties of your state and what pertains to your salvation and perfection. Rest assured that you will never effect your salvation more certainly and that you will never acquire greater perfection than by fulfilling well the duties of your state, if you do so in view of accomplishing the will of God” (Collection, 78).

For saying this I imagine some saw De La Salle as a heretic; however, he was canonized by the Church and declared Patron of All Teachers of Youth!

This significant aspect of Lasallian spirituality, the convergence of the educational work and the individual’s spiritual growth and salvation, should be a good motive for all here at Saint Mary’s University involved in many teaching capacities to come to the campus ready to put in a good day’s work!

In 1852 John Henry Cardinal Newman, one of the greatest thinkers of his time, wrote his classic work on higher education, *The Idea of a University*. In these scholarly discourses Newman explores the essence of a university as a place of teaching, and, he states, it should be thus independently of its relation to the Church. However, he sees the Church as important for the integrity of the university, and states “Not that its main characters are changed by this incorporation; it still has the office of intellectual education, but the Church steadies it in the performance of that office” (Preface). A striking expression, “the Church steadies it in the performance of that office” that could apply to the relationship of an institution of learning and the Lasallian tradition. “Lasallian” means nothing if the institution is not a place of authentic teaching and learning. But the relationship of the institution to the Lasallian heritage can enrich it and “steady it” in its educational mission. The Mission and Vision statement approved by the Board of Trustees in May 2004 affirms clearly that Saint Mary’s is a Lasallian university and “has its foundation in and is inspired by the life, traditions, and heritage of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, innovator in pedagogical methodology, Patron Saint of Teachers, and advocate for the poor.” I notice also the first of eight Planning Priorities for Saint Mary’s for 2009-2011 is to enhance the Lasallian mission and culture.

Some years ago as I was visiting Brothers and colleagues in Colombo, Sri Lanka, I encountered two Sri Lankan Brothers working with a rather well-to-do widow to construct a small one room cinderblock structure where children of the nearby slums could get some basic learning. Because of their condition these children were not accepted in schools. The widow, who was introduced as Auntie, invited us to her home and in the small courtyard was a statue of St. John Baptist de La Salle with two small children. The caption on the statue's pedestal struck me as being a poignant expression of the Lasallian mystique: "Child, give me your hand that I may walk in the light of your faith in me."

The Spirit of the Institute is the Spirit of Faith and the emblem of the Institute world-wide is the Signum Fidei – the Sign of Faith – depicted as a five-pointed star guiding us on the way. The points of the star serve as a convenient summary of our Lasallian tradition: Faith in a God who wants all to be saved, Faith in the potential of our students, Faith in education, Faith in each other, and the Faith of others that we should strive to deserve by fulfilling our Lasallian educational mission.

Truly "blessed," how fortunate are all who personally live the Lasallian mystique of going "beyond the boundaries" in response to today's educational needs and thus further the mission of Saint Mary's University to go "beyond the boundaries" this new academic year and in the future, as Br. William wrote in the Annual Report, "planning beyond 2011."

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