

The Lasallian Tradition and American Culture: What is to be Done?¹

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The words, and the great insight, of course, are those of the holy founder of the work that is yours, John Baptist de La Salle.

As many of you know, I am a Jesuit and a scholar of American religion. Both of these facts, one would have thought, would have been enough to scare you away from asking me to deliver this talk this afternoon. The Benedictines always say that the sun never sets on the Jesuit empire, because God doesn't trust it in the dark. And one of the oldest jokes in the Theology Department at Boston College goes like this: "What do you have when you cross Tony Soprano and a scholar of American religion? The answer, of course, is: "Someone who makes you an offer you can't understand." But here I am, and there you are, so here we are.

The title I suggested for our time together was "The Lasallian Tradition and American Culture: What is to be Done?" But the heart of all of this is, of course, in my subtitle: "What is to be Done?" What is to be done? Indeed.

My experience is that things are seldom what they seem. My sense is that this is true of the Institute to which you have given your lives in the service of the Christian Schools. This fact, that things are seldom what they seem, came home to me dramatically a few weeks ago, as I was preparing to preside at the 5 p.m. Mass at St. Peter's church in Cambridge, Massachusetts. If you have the Mass, you have phone duty at the rectory for the hour before Mass. So, at 4:45 p.m. the phone rang, and I said, "St. Peter's Parish, how can I help you?" The voice at the other end said, "Can you tell me who has the 5 o'clock Mass today?" I answered "Indeed I can, Fr. Mark Massa." After a short pause, the voice at the other end said: "is that the short, plump balding priest?" After the shock of recognition had passed, I said, "Yes, indeed it is."

Your work in the schools, and our Church in the United States today, are not what they seem, and there is always something very much like a "shock of recognition" when we step back and reflect on where we've been, where we are at, and on where we should be going. Especially now, where we should be going in a church in crisis. My job today, is to help you "step back," and to help you experience that "shock of recognition" in building on your distinguished past in preparation for a (hopefully) equally distinguished future. But let me start with the present. On

where we are at. My sense, as an historian, is that we, as Catholics in North America in the early years of the 21st century, are at a challenging place. Let me give you a few dramatic pieces of data to illustrate why I think this:

The Present

The Catholic tradition in North America is facing a number of challenges:

- In my home diocese of Boston, Massachusetts, church attendance among self-described Catholics has gone from 60%, reported in 1990, to 16% in the 2010 religious census. That is, in 30 years, regular church attendance has dropped exponentially.
- The sacrament of confession is down by 86% since 1970.
- Weddings are down by 56% since 1980.

For those of you who are readers of the New York Times. The “Sunday Style’s wedding section,” I’m going to offer you a \$100 reward: email me the next time you can find more than three Catholic weddings reported there, in the midst of a sea of wedding ceremonies officiated by a friend or relative specially appointed by the church of universal humanism. I thought I had become inured to this, but this past summer even I was shocked to read about a wedding presided over by a brother of the bride who had been delegated to officiate by a group calling itself “The Church of the Divine Dude.” Can you imagine? I mean the “Church of the Divine Dude? Your \$100 check will be mailed the next day.

The religious census of 2010 reported that the four largest religious groups, in descending order, are:

- first, Evangelical protestants;
- second, Roman Catholics;
- third, former Catholics;
- fourth, mainstream Protestants like Methodists, Presbyterians, and Lutherans.

Self-described “former Catholics” now constitute the third largest religious group in the United States. Many former Catholics “defect in place” that is, they don’t necessarily join any other church or religious group; they simply stop practicing. Other Catholics do join another group. Thus, according to the Massachusetts Council of Churches, 27% of practicing Episcopalians, and 23% of practicing Congregationalists in the state, report being baptized as Catholics, but now affiliate with another religious body.

Christian Smith, a quite well-regarded sociologist of religion, teaching at the University of Notre Dame, published a book some years ago entitled *Soul Searching*. The subtitle of that book is *The Faith Lives of American Teenagers*. That book was the product of many years of studying the faith lives of American teenagers and twenty-somethings. Looking at two quite large sampling pools of respondents, one of which had 5,000 individual response forms. Smith’s book was a report on what he termed “the real religion of American teenagers,” which was sobering indeed. For those of us who work in Catholic educational institutions, or who worry about passing on the

faith to younger people, Christian Smith asserted that, whatever the religion they wrote on the line after “religious affiliation,” the great majority of U.S. teenagers actually belonged to the “Church of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.” The creed of this religion is a simple 5 point creed:

- First, there is a God who looks after the world, but he is a distant and shadowy figure who only gets involved in our lives when we want him to. This benevolent deity is, according to this creed, finally concerned about making us feel better about ourselves, and delivers aid and self-worth in asked-for quantities. Thus, Smith refers to this deity as “God as Cosmic Therapist” or “God as Divine Butler.”
- Second, the purpose of Christianity is finally therapeutic. That is, the message of the gospel is about helping us accept the fact that, despite the fact our parents don’t understand me, or accept the fact that I don’t look good in “skinny jeans,” or that I won’t be going to Princeton, “fitting in” and having a more positive self-image constitutes the very heart of the gospel message. One 16 year old boy interviewed by Smith thus summarized the entire moral code of Christianity in a pungent one-line precis: “Christianity,” he said, “meant ‘don’t be an ass-hole. Be who you are.’” A somewhat more succinct statement of the Christian faith, I think, than that contained in the Nicene Creed.
- Third, religious teaching is true if it works for you. Thus, it is both wrong and uncool to impose your own religious beliefs, however strongly held, on others. As Smith points out, this makes all religion relative. If it works for you, fine, but it may not be true for others.
- Fourth, all people go to heaven when they die. Thus, the most common comment uttered by teenagers at funerals, “this is sad, but we know he’s in a better place.” As Smith wryly observes, “how do they know he’s in a better place?” Hell thus seemingly contains only Hitler and Stalin.
- Fifth, but by no means least important, “whatever.”

Perhaps most troubling for me, and I would guess for most of you as well, is the fact that Smith reports that Catholic teenagers were the most likely to be adherents of this faith. Smith found that Jewish, Mormon, and Evangelical Protestant teenagers were the least likely believers in the faith of moralistic therapeutic deism, while adherents of that faith which sponsors more educational institutions for passing on its faith to young people, that is, Roman Catholicism, are the most likely adherents of that faith. What happened? How did this come about? Where did that self-proclaimed “Catholic mini-state in America” of the 1940s and 1950s go?

One can only imagine what John Baptist de La Salle, sacrificing his own quite comfortable bourgeois family background to open the first school of the institute for poor boys in Rheims in 1670, would have of these responses about the Holy Faith by self-identified Catholic students.

The Catholic Church in the United States is reinventing itself even as we speak, whether we want that reinvention or not. The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, CARA, for those of us who read their online pages every day, reports that 40% of all practicing Catholics in the United States are Hispanic. It predicts that by 2015 that number will be 60%. The massive defection of Anglo Catholics in places like Boston have helped shape that statistic, but it has not invented it.

I think it is important for the Catholic community in the U.S. to understand that Hispanics were the first Catholics in what is now the U.S., long before the pilgrims and puritans arrived in the seventeenth century. There were Hispanic Catholic missionaries in what is now Florida and the American southwest. The first diocese in the New World was San Juan, Puerto Rico, established in 1511, a century before the founding of Jamestown and Boston.

Thus, CARA reports that the majority of Hispanic Catholics in the U.S. today are not immigrants, but are rather citizens who have been here for some time. The former Provost of Boston College, an epidemiologist and physician, who was of Mexican-American heritage, the first time I met him I asked, "How long has your family been in Texas?" He replied, "Since 1723." The tide of immigration has not swollen dramatically, despite the disparate reporting of national news corporations and certain political demagogues who would have us think that the U.S. is being over-run by "others." But the stream is steady, and it's not going to go away.

Despite the fact that Hispanics have the largest percentage of lay Catholics in faith formation and pastoral leadership programs, the U.S. Catholic community is only partly prepared for this new Hispanic presence in its midst. We've done better here than we have in the past, say with the Eastern Rite Catholics in Pennsylvania a century ago, or the Polish Catholics in Chicago. I would give us a "C+" for our welcoming approach to the Hispanic community, but then again I'm a hard grader, if you ask anyone at Boston College. But there are many places in the U.S. Catholic Church that are amazingly unprepared for this new presence in our midst. One of those places is my home institution itself, which is still overwhelmingly upper middle class, northeastern, and Irish. Indeed, I always say that at Boston College, I am a minority, because my last name ends in a vowel. There are thus all kinds of insider Boston College Irish jokes, like the one that says that an Atheist at Boston College is someone who believes that there is not a God, and that the Blessed Virgin Mary is his immaculately conceived mother.

I would posit that ranking, just as important as the previous challenges to the community, the dramatic decrease in Catholic practice, the failure of passing on the faith and the Church to our own young people, and the dramatic increase of Hispanic presence in our community, is the political division within the American Catholic community itself. The city of Boston has a revered lecture series, stretching back to the late nineteenth century called "The Lowell Lectures in the Humanities." Open to anyone who shows up and funded by the Lowell's, an old Yankee family that mistreated Irish immigrants in its textile Mills for generations. Several years ago I was invited to deliver one of the Lowell Lectures, the title of my talk was "A Pox on Both Your Houses: Moving beyond Conservative/Liberal Labels in the American Catholic Community." It managed to tick off almost everyone there, so I think I did my job pretty well.

My read of the American Catholic landscape since the end of the Second Vatican Council is that one of the most dramatic things that strikes you when you read Catholic newspapers, journals, or blog sites, is the degree to which American Catholics have borrowed political monikers in talking about their own, and others', places in the community. Events in the community since the mid-1960s have given rise, problematically I think, to factions that are labeled by commentators, both inside and outside the church, as "liberal" and "conservative."

There are, perhaps, understandable reasons why such labels emerged in the first place, and are now taken to be self-evidently appropriate. There is, most assuredly a certain intellectual ease in using the same labels in reporting church feuds as the secular media use in narrating political debates. Perhaps this very ease appealed to Catholics who were new to the game of talking about “parties” within the household of faith, as until the early sixties there were only two kinds of Catholics: practicing and lapsed.

But the result is a situations in which Catholics, then and now, who supported changes sponsored by the Second Vatican Council, are designated as “liberals,” while those who opposed those changes are termed “conservatives.” There were, and are, Salient alliances between opponents of the Council with strategies of political and social conservatism advanced by specific political parties in the United States, just as some supporters of the reforms of Second Vatican Council allied themselves with left-leaning political causes. But the labels are problematic at best, and indeed obscure as much as they reveal. There is nothing intrinsically “liberal” in wanting to worship God in one’s own language, at least as the word “liberal” has been understood in the North American political context. If “liberal” is construed to mean capitulating to secular standards by betraying ecclesiastical ones, it is not clear to me why reading Canon One in English is more “progressive” than reading Canon One in Latin.

Far more helpful, and far more true, in talking about the changes in the American Catholic community, is the major shift in the relationship of the church to American culture that has occurred in the last fifty years.

The Crisis of Models (..and I am not Referring to Madison Avenue)

H. Richard Niebuhr, the founding figure in what is now the discipline of the sociology of religion, published a book in 1951 entitled *Christ and Culture*. In that book Niebuhr argued that there were really only five basic models for understanding the relationship of Christianity to human culture. Niebuhr argued that the model that defined most of the history of western Catholicism was that of “Christ above culture.” In the model of “Christ above culture,” religion’s job was to serve as the teacher and director of human culture. And the Catholic Church in the United States for its first two hundred years most certainly followed that model.

The Catholic Church understood its place in U.S. culture as standing above the culture, directing it and correcting it. Not surprisingly, Catholic Church ran something like a vast mini-state during the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries. Catholic grade and high schools; Catholic hospitals and orphanages; Catholic lawyer guilds and poet groups; Catholic magazines and journals. All of these provided warmth and comforting, if confining and sometimes smothering, parallel universe in which one could easily tell “ours” from “theirs.” One attended Sacred Heart grade school, then La Salle High School, then Manhattan College, and then Fordham Law School. And behold, at 24 years old, most of your friends and all of your cousins were Catholics. I once owned a Catholic Newspaper from the 1950s, and its headline read: “Plane crashes with 59 passengers dead; no Catholics onboard.”

The reason why that parallel Catholic universe worked so well as that everyone in it understood that the leaders of the institutional Church piped the tune, and everyone else danced to it. For

Catholics, the institutional Church stood well above every other institution, and it was tacitly understood where the primary loyalties lay. When Franklin Roosevelt visited Georgetown University in the 1930s, the story goes that the secretary to the Jesuit president of the University went into his office and announced: “Fr. President, Mr. Roosevelt is here to see you.”

That parallel universe, so painstakingly constructed in the nineteenth century, fell apart in the decades after 1945. Vatican II is often targeted as the reason, but the GI bill of 1945 was actually the change agent that set off the crumbling of the ghetto walls. With the GI bill, which provided college financial support for every soldier, catholic lambs were allowed to eat ivy, or anything else growing on university buildings. That bill began the break-up of the catholic mini-state, as Catholics left their first areas of settlement and moved to the suburbs, where their neighbors weren’t necessarily fellow Irish, Italian or German Catholics. Their neighbors could be, and increasingly were, anything.

What that break-up meant theologically was that mainstream Catholics began to move from the “Christ above culture” model that defined their ghetto to a “Christ of culture” one. In this second model, their religion and their culture intermeshed altogether too comfortably. American Catholics, like every religious and ethnic group before them, began to take more and more of their ethical, political, and social cues from the culture itself, and not from Father O’Malley in the pulpit on Sunday mornings.

That change to a much broader set of cues about values and tastes, in itself, was a good thing, or at least a neutral thing. What was more troubling was that this “Christ of culture” model contributed to an increasingly secular and therapeutic understanding of Catholicism’s role in peoples’ lives. It is this “therapeutic” element that I want to emphasize.

In all models of therapeutic religion, in this case North American Catholicism, religion exists for our benefit, and oftentimes that understanding morphs into “religion exists to make us adjust better to our hectic lives.” The prophetic impulse in Christianity disappears, and the priestly impulse, the impulse that exists to comfort us and get us over the hard times, takes over completely. For those of you who read Robert Bellah’s great book *Habits of the Heart* might remember “Sheila-ism.” The religion of a woman named Sheila whom Bellah interviewed. Sheila-ism was a mixture of various strains of piety and self-help, which went into serving Sheila herself, who comprised the central figure in her faith.

Sheila-ism, I think, is simply the grown-up version of the moralistic, therapeutic deism that Christian Smith talked about. And my experience at Boston College (which is 72% Catholic) is that there is quite a bit of Sheilaism there. This “Christ of culture” model also accounts for what one finds when one looks through the “religion section” at Barnes and Noble. One finds great theological tomes with titles like *Chicken Soup for the Soul* and *What Color Is Your Parachute?*

My own understanding of the past seventy years is that precisely this change of models happened in the American Catholic community. The result has been that calls for Sacrifice, or concern for the marginalized, or demands for social justice by various voices across what the secular press calls the “catholic left” and the “catholic right,” have become increasingly hard to accept, or even hear. Calls for fidelity to the church’s message of respect for life, or calls to oppose the

death penalty, or concern for would-be immigrants kept out by high fences just a few miles from us, all of these issues have become the fodder for political debate, not in the congress, but within the Catholic community itself.

Part of the Cultural Divide within the American Catholic

Community today is our inability to accept a common narrative in which all of us see ourselves. We had such a narrative when we were all safely, if suffocatingly, confined inside the Catholic ghetto. But once those walls came down, along with all the benefits of leaving a ghetto behind, came a realization that we probably never really were a community, but a community of communities. Only now there aren't even walls that keep all the communities together. We now find ourselves all over the ecological landscape of religion. There are now "Commonweal Catholics" and "EWTN Catholics;" "orthodox Catholics" and "pro-choice Catholics"; "natural Family planning Catholics" and "intentional community Catholics." You name it: we got them.

Again, all of those things are arguably good, or at least neutral in themselves. But the problem is that much of the energy and passion fueling those factions do not arise from Catholic or even broadly religious impulses, but rather from essentially cultural, political, and economic loyalties that now inform religious loyalties, and not the other way around. This, from a theological point of view, is a very dangerous situation for a religious community to be in. And that is because much of the debate in the community, while couched in religious language, finally has very little to do with faith and religion at all. It has to do with cultural location, economic resources, political loyalties, and educational background. Social psychologists call such communal situations "demonic." Not because they believe that those communities are possessed by demons, but rather because the communities so described are actually run by forces they don't understand or control. There, have I terrified everyone enough?

Last, but by no means least in the challenges facing the Catholic community in the United States, is the large and neuralgic question of the role of women in the church. The Catholic Church has a woman problem, and it is not going to go away. We all know the jokes that feminist scholars tell, like the one that says Ginger Rodgers did everything Fred Astair did, but backwards and in high heels. But this is not a joking matter, and I think the Catholic community is going to have to address it in some sustained way.

The church didn't officially mandate the keeping of parish records until the Council of Trent in the mid sixteenth century. There has been a very distinguished group of French social historians called the "Annales School," who, over the course of several generations, have actually mined those records, now largely in government-run depositories in France and Germany.

What the Annales historians have discovered, not surprisingly, or at least not surprisingly to those of us who go to church regularly, is that the majority of regular church goers have always been – as they are today – women. Likewise, in the first religious census in the United States, taken in 1850, the same data turned up: women have made up between 50 and 60% of regular church-goers.

Thus, the question of women like Sister Simone Campbell, who heads the Washington-based lobbying group “Network,” and was the organizer of the “Nuns on the Bus” tour of several summers ago, seems to be especially pertinent to us today: “Why do so many catholic women, who are now, as they have always been, the majority of the catholic faithful, feel excluded from leadership roles in the church?” There are, I know, many tangled theological issues involved in this discussion. But as the German Bishops Conference pointed out five years ago, until 1981 there was no canonical reason why women couldn’t be made Cardinals. In the older code of canon law, one didn’t have to be a Bishop, or even a man, to be a Cardinal. Why not revert to that section of the older code, and appoint women Cardinals?

Over the course of the past few decades, a number of Catholic scholars have raised the question of women Deacons. The Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament actually gives us lists of female names who functioned as Deacons in the Jerusalem Church. Why is the leadership of community so hesitant to even bring up the question of women’s leadership? I’m always astonished by this.

For much of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, religious women ran the vast majority of Catholic institutions in the United States. Yes, Fr. O’Malley and his associate priests lived in the rectory, but sisters staffed the vast majority of Catholic grade schools, Catholic hospitals and Catholic orphanages. It’s estimated that there 11 times as many religious women than priests and religious men in the U.S. Catholic community in 1930. The sheer number of orders of religious women is mind boggling, and actually takes one’s breath away when you start to study the historical record. One of the jokes that the Dominicans tell is that there are three mysteries that only God knows the answer to: how many colors do nuns’ habits come in, what is the third mystery of Fatima, and what are the Jesuits really up to?

As you and I both know, the ranks of religious women was seriously depleted in the decades after 1965, and with that depletion came a crisis in women’s leadership roles, or at least women’s visibility in the American Catholic community. I think we have arrived at a critical moment in the life of our community when we have to look at this issue in a sustained and serious way.

On top of these issues that define the culture wars in which the Catholic community finds itself, there have been internal challenges within the Lasallian tradition as well, both in the Institute and in the schools sponsored by the Institute, which make carrying out the vision of your holy founder more complex, and sometimes even pose internal divisions between you.

The 50 or so secondary schools that belong to the Lasallian family in the United States are diverse in both make-up and sponsorship. Reflecting the kind of cultural diversity that De La Salle, in seventeenth century France, could never have imagined. While almost all Lasallian schools tend to enjoy strong alumni support, and typically have few if any enrollment problems, the clear-cut educational model envisioned by your founder has been “complexified” (to use a predicate favored by my English department colleagues). Many are still all male, while others evince models very different from the seventeenth century prototypes: several are co-sponsored with female religious; several run on the Cristo Rey model, or include middle schools; several might be portrayed as “post-Christian” in spirit or faculty loyalties.

In a word, the Lasallian schools network is far more diverse than, say the networks of Jesuit, Xavierian, or Sacred Heart schools. It is more like the network of Mercy schools. This diversity of models is, of course, on one level, a blessing. But this kind of diversity also poses some challenges.

In 1920, over 92% of elementary and secondary Catholic school teachers were either male clerics or women religious. By 1990, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University (CARA) reported that over 92% of elementary and secondary school teachers in Catholic institutions were lay people. Yet again, that change can be read as a very good sign, or at least as a neutral one. After all, Vatican II has been termed “the Council of the Laity.” So one might see this sea change in the percentage of brothers to lay people in the classroom as simply one aspect of the laity coming into its own. But it also poses some challenges, sometimes divisive challenges.

While the founder of the institute had a rigorist approach to both the daily order of the brothers, and of the schools for poor boys that they sponsored, Christian Brother Schools in the U.S. are generally on the “liberal” side of Catholic identity. Indeed, several American archdioceses where there are Lasallian schools have “tightened up” the language of educational guidelines to ensure what one Bishop called “a more rigid adherence to church documents regarding sexual teaching as a condition of employment.” What some have termed “Warrior Bishops” in places like Providence, Detroit, San Francisco and Oakland, California have sought more direct oversight of theology courses in what are, canonically speaking, anyway, independent schools. As most of you know on a far more first-hand basis than I, this has led to a fair amount of publicity at both the local and national levels.

Publicity about the values being passed on in religion classes of secondary Catholic schools, of course, is hardly new or anomalous, or even necessarily a bad thing. Jesuit high schools went through a similar spate of news stories about emphasizing the social teaching of the Church over the “theology of the body” being taught by then Pope John Paul II. This led one conservative pundit in the magazine *First Things*, to observe that “the sun never sets on the Jesuit empire, because God doesn’t trust it in the dark.”

The Lasallian Tradition, Charism, and Institutional Religion

I came across an interesting website a few weeks ago, actually, someone sent me a link to the site. It’s called “The Jesuits and the Plot to Undermine American Culture.” Who knew? No one sends me the emails for those meetings to plot the overthrow of American culture, which presumably take place in the basement of the Jesuit residence at Boston College. Who knew?

Reading through that website was sort of a “Busman’s Holiday” for me, as I published a book a few years ago entitled *Anti-Catholicism in American Culture: The Last Acceptable Prejudice*. Anti-Catholicism in the United States, of course, is an old tradition. The great historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., called it “the oldest impulse in American culture.” And one of the most common charges leveled against Catholics and their Church is that it stands apart; that it is an “undigestible other” (as Jimmy Swaggert put it) in the midst of a culture founded by and for Protestant Christians.

The point I made in my book was that such fears of Catholic “otherness” and its authoritarian efforts to undermine the freedoms of U.S. culture, much like the rumors of Mark Twain’s death, are somewhat exaggerated. My own reading of Catholic history over the last half-century is that, far from being “outsiders” and on the margins of our culture, most American Catholics all but fell over themselves to take part in U.S. culture. As a result of the cultural embrace begun in the 1920s and 30s, but pursued with real fervor in the years between 1950 and 1980, American Catholicism became our culture’s loudest and most uncritical cheerleader. The results, for a chastened Liberal like myself, are at best ambivalent for the explicitly religious mission of Catholic Christianity in this country.

And precisely because the broad middle class of American Catholicism embraced U.S. culture altogether too uncritically, the Catholic community “backed into modernity.” This “backing into modernity” by enthusiastically accepting American cultural values succeeded sociologically in making American Catholics all but indistinguishable as a group from their fellow citizens in terms of ethical values, social mores, and cultural tastes. The old portrayal of Catholics in the movies of the 1930s and 40s is now risible. Far from being primarily working class, a large part of the Catholic community now defines economic success. According to the 2010 religious census, Irish Catholics are now the wealthiest and most educated non-Jewish ethnic group in the United States.

Thus, according to our most recent religious census, the “rankings,” if you will, of ethnic groups by wealth and years of education goes like this: first, Jewish Americans; second, Irish American Catholics; third, White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (“WASPS”); fourth, German American Protestants and Catholics. While the Catholic community’s success in mainstream U.S. culture has brought profound blessings and gifts, it has also posed profound theological challenges to us. What Challenges?

The bitter internal debates between progressives and traditionalists; the crisis of handing on the faith and the Church to young people; the nagging question of “singularity” – that is, how are Catholic institutions like schools and hospitals different from other American institutions? I know the Jesuits ask this question all the time, and I presume the Lasallian community does as well. As the founder of Methodists, John Wesley, said so well over two centuries ago, “in religion, nothing fails like success.”

This is all very interesting as a history lesson, I can hear some of you thinking, but what does this have to do with the question of Lasallian schools right now? Well, I think all of this has a great deal to do with all of you.

In the course of the twentieth century, mainstream American Catholicism moved, ecologically, from its niche in in the American religious landscape, and quite frankly its destination appears uncertain. Catholic conservatives called, and are calling, for continued allegiance to the “Catholic mini-state model,” – in which Catholics would continue to live in a network of parochial and diocesan institutions from cradle to grave – while Catholic progressives work toward the an Adaptationist immersion in culture. But all the parties to the debate recognize that – in the half century since the closing of Vatican II, a seismic redefinition of American

Catholicism is going on. Catholicism's "structured" identity is adrift, and models of where to go, and how to get there, are sorely needed. That's where all of you come in.

Please bear with me for the next several minutes, as I put my "scholar of American religion" hat on my pointy head to quote Max Weber. This is where addresses like these sometimes go off the rails, ending up in the great scene from Monty Python's "Life of Brian," where the disciples end up parsing what Brian meant in declaring (so they thought) "blessed are the cheesemakers." "I think he meant all makers of dairy products" one of them finally says. So here goes – with no riff on the beatitudes at all.

At the very beginning of the twentieth century, the great German scholar Max Weber produced one of the landmark essays in the sociology of religion, an essay entitled "On Charisma and Institution Building." In that essay, Weber argued that all the world's religious traditions, Christianity chief among them, are bi-polar. That is, Christianity (like all religions) operates between two poles. One pole rests on the insights of charismatic prophets, whose authority transcends official Church structures. That is, Weber argued that charismatic individuals in western religion (individuals like Moses, Isaiah, Amos, Jesus of course, and St. Paul) did not derive their vision or their authority from institutions.

Thus Moses could denounce the ancient superstitions of a Semitic Tribe in the name of a higher authority, and Jesus could chide the scribes and Pharisees, the "official" religious teachers of first century Palestine, with confident assertion that "one greater than Moses is with you." No one authorized St. Paul to say, as he did in the first chapter of the letter to the Romans, "no one is saved by the works of the law." Thus over-turning centuries of scribal teaching regarding the Torah. Francis of Assisi scared the bejesus out of the pope, and your holy founder had no end of problems with the pastor of the local parish and various Bishops in Rheims and in Paris.

"Institutional" religion, on the other hand, finds its authority in bureaucratic structures. This pole of Christianity says "I have power because a bishop laid his hands on me," or "my authority derives from the fact Cardinal O'Malley tasked me to do this." Charismatic traditions within Catholicism know nothing of such "official" forms. By its very nature, "charisma," in Max Weber's sense, wants to avoid such institutional definitions of discipleship and authority. The authority of such charismatic individuals and movements derives from the sense of mission itself; it doesn't depend on an "ok" from higher up the hierarchical ladder. Such charismatic power and identity is self-authenticating and transcends official sanctions.

At the very end of his life, St. Ignatius of Loyola the holy founder of my religious order, was asked by his first biographer, Laynez, how he felt when the pope officially "founded" his order with a papal bull. After a pause, St. Ignatius famously said, "The pope did not found the Society of Jesus. God founded the Society of Jesus." Which actually has a lot of supporting evidence in its favor, as the Jesuits have made every student mistake they could, and we are still here. So there's no other logical explanation than that of St. Ignatius himself, given all of our blunders, the only explanation for our survival is that God might indeed have founded the society.

Just as an aside, my friends in the Dominican order always remind me that we haven't been especially successful from the standpoint of the order of preachers either. One of them recently

told me, “the order of preachers was founded to stamp out the Albigensians, and the Jesuits were founded to stamp out the Protestants. How many Albigensians have you met recently?”

By its very nature, charismatic authority (the authority of Jesus and St. Paul and St. Ignatius and St. John Baptist De la Salle) is unstable. The authority possessed by charismatic individuals like these is short lived, because there is a natural crisis in the movements when their founders die. The question inevitably arises in all movements founded by such charismatic individuals. “How shall we pass on the vision offered, the authority uncovered?” How shall the memory of this holy one survive his death?

Weber saw that western Christianity, and most especially the Catholic Church, was nothing but a continuous cycle of charisma and routinization. St. Benedict and St. Francis develop followers around a commitment to radical simplicity; they called for a model of discipleship that transcended what they perceived to be a worldly church. Indeed, both Benedict and Francis sought to reduce contact with the hierarchical church by initially refusing to have ordained clergy among their followers. But the visions of both of these “prophets” became radically transformed in the generations after their deaths. Benedictines and Franciscans in the generation immediately after the death of the founders routinized the original anti-structural message of living a “life against the world” into an organized, structured lifestyle open to others. The very “routine” of a convent or monastery represented the institutional price for the continued life of the original anti-structural charism.

Inevitably, and this is an extremely important “inevitably,” such institutionalization of the charismatic impulse risks becoming “too safe.” This danger is both inevitable in all institution building, and dangerous to the original vision of the founder. It is inevitable because the founding vision of any movement or institute is dependent on the presence and leadership of its visionary founder. It is dangerous because any institutionalization of the charism can become too “safe,” too rigid, too ironed out. The thrill of evangelical witness and discipleship can become rote, too much like life “in the world.”

Weber himself observed that the Roman Catholic Church was full of examples of religious reform movements whose original mission was to call an overly-rigid, overly-legalized understanding of the Christian message “ad fontes.” That is, back to the authentic, anti-institutional “fountains” or sources that founded those communities. The Franciscan tradition represented just one of many such cycles of charismatic vision, institutionalization, and then a reform charismatic protest against a too worldly and rigid tradition of Franciscan life.

Very shortly after the death of St. Francis himself, the order of Friars minor split into two groups, the Conventuals and the Franciscans “of the regular observance.” The spiritual Franciscans emerged a century later in protest against the worldliness and the growth of real estate holdings of both groups, which the spiritual Franciscans argued was a betrayal of the original vision of Francis. A century later the Capuchins broke off from all of these groups in an attempt to return to the “pure sources” of the original rule. By the twenty-first century there are all kinds of third order and even Protestant Franciscan groups.

All of these split-off and reform movements within the Franciscan tradition are examples of Weber's continual cycle of charismatic founding, followed by routinization, followed by yet another reform movement against the previous attempt at institutionalizing the founding impulse. Indeed, the Franciscan history of this cycles has led a Franciscan I live with at Boston College, a "tor" Franciscan, to argue that the most basic Franciscan impulse is to break off and be more pure and poor than their mother house. As a Jesuit, far be it from me to comment!

Viewed from Weber's perspective, the call of the second Vatican Council to men and women religious, voiced in its document *Perfectae Caritatis*, to return to the fresh insights of their founders, in order to appropriately adapt to the modern world, represented just such a call to just such a reform movement. In Weber's terms, it was a call from the highest teaching body in the church (no less) to break through the routinization that had become, in many instances, overly-rigid and tired, in order to recover the fresh and dynamic charisms of the founders. The introduction to that document, usually translated in English as "the up to date renewal of religious life" said this:

"The appropriate renewal of religious life involves two simultaneous processes: 1) a continuous return to the sources ("ad fontes") of all Christian life and the original inspiration behind a given community, and 2) an adjustment of the community to the changed conditions of our times."

The Christian Brothers did just that. Up until 1966, schools operated by the Christian Brothers in the U.S. operated under goals and guidelines remarkably similar to those of Catholic schools in general, with some major exceptions. These exceptions were largely derived from the *Goal Statements* of 1943, and the *Rule* of 1947. In response to the call of Vatican II in *Perfectae Caritatis*, the 1967 *Declaration on the Brother in the World Today* began the first step to recapture the charisms of the original founding of the institute, and the *Rule* of 1967 continued that recovery by implementing key aspects of the schools based on the writings of De La Salle himself. Both of these undertakings, as you know well, led to the 1986 document *Characteristics of Lasallian Schools*, which updated the key characteristics of Christian Brother schools precisely by recovering the impulses present in the very first schools founded by De La Salle.

My own sense is that the entire Lasallian family has done a remarkable job in the past four decades, because precisely while these demographic challenges were occurring, along with significant financial challenges in the running of the schools, the return to the original impulses of your founding revived a concern for the education of the economically marginalized, as well as new concerns for the poor in the southern hemisphere. These new undertakings in the third world have been remarkably successful, given the challenges at home.

Arguably the most impressive of the many ways in which the Lasallian community took stock of itself and "adapted to the times," as the second Vatican Council called for, was the expansion of precisely who was included in the community itself. During these 50 years, the proportion of brothers involved in running the Lasallian schools dramatically shifted, with a much higher percentage of lay colleagues in the classroom and administration.

So, What is to be Done?

The great Lasallian tradition represents a rich source of charismatic authority in the American Catholic community today. If Max Weber's analysis is correct, and I think it is, every vibrant religious community needs a healthy balance of charisma and routinization. The Catholic Church universally had a large infusion of charismatic juices between 1961 and 1965, during the second Vatican Council. The Council set off all kinds of returning to the fresh sources of religious founding. But the Church has also had thirty years of institutionalization under John Paul II and Benedict. Now, under Pope Francis, the time is ripe for a return to prophetic witness.

The Pope is under attack from various corners of the institutional church, precisely because he has attempted to refocus our attention away from internal navel-gazing to those outside, or on the margins, of the Church's care. This refocusing scares the you-know-what out of bureaucrats who have grown accustomed to a more sedate and predictable central office. Much in the same way that Francis of Assisi, Ignatius of Loyola, and John Baptist de La Salle unsettled the institutional churches of their day. But in the process of doing precisely that, of unsettling the powers that be, a very strong argument can be made that they saved the institutional church from the challenges that would later appear. De La Salle set up the conditions, in his work with poor boys, for the French Church to endure the revolution several generations later, to experience what church historians now call "The French religious revival of the nineteenth century." My best advice is that the Lasallian community today emulate the leadership of its founder.

The Lasallian community is primed to take a leading role in that prophetic return. Why? Because you are a tradition built on a non-hierarchical understanding of church witness. As we all know, the Catholic Church in the U.S. is in crisis mode with regard to clergy. The bishops have avoided facing this issue head-on, and have opted instead for ill-conceived avoidance tactics, importing clergy from the southern hemisphere, as though the countries from which these clergy come do not themselves need clergy.

The bishops have also more or less opened the gates of seminaries to whomever applies, so that we now have many freshly-ordained priests who are unwilling or unable to share their toys with the laity. And on that matter, I direct your attention to Cardinal John Henry Newman, who in his essay entitled "On Consulting the Faithful on Matters of Doctrine," wryly remarked that while the Vatican did not consult the faithful in issuing new teaching, it did so to its own peril, as the faithful constituted that "99% of church without whom it would look pretty silly."

I refer to the current tactics of the U.S. Bishops' Conference to provide ordained leadership for the catholic community as the "cannon fodder approach," which goes something like this: as long as a Bishop put his hands on you at some point, you are a community leader." As one of my Jesuit professors told me in the retreat before my own diaconate ordination, "if you have a ding-a-ling before ordination, after ordination you have an ordained ding-a-ling." It's not working. It's not working.

The Lasallians have built a solid network of institutions where the clerical-lay divide never meant much. I think the U.S. Catholic Church desperately needs the example you offer. In the institution where I am dean, only 18% of the student body are ordinary: over 80% of the students

are highly gifted, well-trained lay students ready and willing to minister to the Church. My institution is only one of many institutions training ministers for the church. The vast majority of other Catholic institutions that do this are seminaries open only to priest candidates.

You run a national network of institutions that are lay-run and lay-staffed, and have successfully done so for centuries. The American Church desperately needs this witness, especially given the fact that your identity is not simply a response to contemporary demographic changes, but has a revered lineage that goes back centuries. We desperately need your witness on this institutional identity, precisely as American Catholicism is becoming lay-staffed and lay-led, with or without episcopal blessing. Your very identity offers a charismatic and prophetic challenge to an overly routinized tradition that can no longer support itself with a leadership model that is now bankrupt, and, more to the point, is now unsustainable. The Lasallian tradition of lay disciples, probably the status of all disciples in the first century after Jesus, offers a working model of how the Catholic community can organize for a future that not only “settles” for non-ordained leaders, but can flourish and even grow. In other words, I think you have the functioning model for what is, in fact, already happening in our community. I think you need to be bolder and more strategic in presenting that tradition outside the boundaries of the Lasallian network.

This will involve some thought, and not a little prudence, as some hierarchical figures do not like to be told that “it’s not working” in the church. I once told a group of diocesan priests in the Midwest that not all the parts of Bishops bodies work equally. Indeed, I mentioned that in referring to the then-Bishop of the diocese in which I was teaching, “Their ears are purely decorative.” That phrase, “the ears are purely decorative,” made its way across several Midwestern dioceses, largely without attribution to me. But I also want to remember the courageous witness of Peggy Steinfels, a good friend of mine and then editor of *Commonweal Magazine*, who told the bishops gathered in the midst of the sex abuse crisis, “Gentlemen, most Catholics are Catholics not because of you, but in spite of you.”

The very lay character of your tradition offers an incredible resource to the North American Catholic community. How willing has the Lasallian community been to stand up, like Peggy Steinfels, and remind church leaders that most of the parts of the church that are working have little, if anything, to do with hierarchy? What would happen if you did? I don’t know, but it would be interesting to try.

The Lasallian tradition of caring for those “on the margins” of society fits seamlessly with the core message of the present Pope, a message of compassion and practical witness. Pope Francis is fond of repeating the famous words of Francis of Assisi, “preach always; if necessary, use words.” But the care of your institute for the poor, grounded in the vision of De La Salle himself, stretches back centuries, well before the current Pope. De La Salle believed that the Christian schools would stand under a special divine blessing so long as they never betrayed the command of the lord Jesus himself that the “poor have the gospel preached to them.”

De La Salle wrote this to his followers in the schools:

“You are under obligation to instruct the children of the poor. You should, consequently, cultivate a very special tenderness for them, and procure their spiritual welfare as far as

you are able. Faith, which should animate you, should make you prefer them to the wealthiest children on earth, because they are the living images of Jesus Christ.”

Indeed, De La Salle envisioned his schools to be places where juvenile delinquents would find direction, discipline, and a life path. To that extent, his mission and yours involves matters of life and death. The phrase that modern experts in urban education use, that schools in the inner cities of America involve matters of life and death, has a long lineage among you, and you must not let the experts in graduate schools of education steal that phrase. It is yours, and you should claim it.

Precisely because you never lost sight of that central vision of your founder, that education was about “salvation” on a number of levels, I would say that you are one of the few places within institutional Catholicism in the U.S. that didn’t “back into modernity” in the sense of over-adapting itself to the dominant culture. A culture in which Irish Catholics are now the wealthiest and best educated non-Jewish ethnic group in the U.S. The Lasallian tradition never lost its soul in the desperate rush to “fit in” to the affluent mainstream, a deadly embrace that one critic has termed “the suburban captivity of the Church.”

This prophetic, charismatic witness is especially needed now, in the context of the contemporary, deeply divided, American Catholic Church. Pope Francis is attempting to shift the discussion away from the tiresome internally-politicized name calling that has me (and I presume you as well) exhausted and frustrated. In order to focus “on the margins,” where Pope Francis believes Jesus wants the church to be. The Lasallian community in the U.S. has the opportunity to offer a single service at this moment by talking about not what this or that specific school is doing, but about what the Lasallian community as a whole is about, and is currently doing both here and in Latin America.

I would ask you to consider how you might better model what you are already doing so well in the Christian schools to the entire Catholic community, even to those overly-comfortable Jesuits who tend to pay too much attention to standardized tests. Like Jesus, you may need a better publicity agent in getting the word out about how your mission in education stands much closer to the message Jesus preached than others engaged in the educational apostolate.

This is, I know, a delicate task as you need to avoid both arrogance and overstatement in making such witness. But challenging the whole community to remember that one of the signs of the kingdom is that the poor have the gospel preached to them is everybody’s business, and not just the Lasallians.

And finally, you are going to have to figure out how you are going to be distinctively Catholic in a deeply polarized Catholic community. You all know this, as every Catholic educator in America knows this. But both the opportunities and the challenges have specific characteristics in your case. As a lay-sponsored and run network, as schools that have a special obligation to educate those on the margins, you are viewed as being in an enviable position by some, and also with some suspicion. And there are more than several Bishops in that latter category. And for one last time, that latter fact may be a good thing, or at least a neutral thing.

I've read from a distance. I know about some of the challenges you've faced. I know about the "issues" around Sacred Heart Cathedral Prep and Archbishop Cordileone; about the talk radio fall-out about having gay couples attend the prom at La Salle College High School; I've read about the "pool mass" controversy, and about the same-sex wedding announcement at Calvert Hall. You've had your share of challenges during the past decade.

But I want to return to something I talked about earlier. This morning, Catholicism like all religious traditions has always (necessarily) had to balance institutional and prophetic values. Thus it always was; thus it always will be. My sense is that you've done a better job than most in balancing those two poles of the ongoing tension between the values of the past and the vision of the future. Ralph Waldo Emerson once said that the good thing about the party of hope and the party of memory is that the party of memory usually dies first.

I would urge you not to be discouraged or put off by the sometimes negative reactions of talk radio or Bishops. And I'm not speaking from the standpoint of Oscar Wilde either, who observed that the only thing worse than being talked about is not being talked about. I'm speaking from the standpoint of the need for prophetic witness in an over-routinized and over-centralized church. Bishops, alas, as Jesus said about the poor, we will always have with us. Prophets are a scarcer commodity.

On what issues, and in what ways, are you called to be prophetic in today's church? You know the answers to that far better than I do. But I would encourage you Pecca Fortier, as Martin Luther once famously said, "Sin boldly." The worst historical heresy is the belief that the models of the past will fit seamlessly to model the future. That is literally always false. As John Henry Newman famously remarked in his essay on the development of Christian doctrine, "to live is to change, and to live long is to have changed often."

How will the Catholic witness of the Lasallian schools retain its prophetic edge while sharing the mission of the institutional church? I don't have any easy answers for you, but I do have the sense that is the \$64,000 question. How can you best balance those two loyalties? That is the heart of the Lasallian mission, I think. So it deserves all the headaches and challenges you will have to face in answering that question.

Let the games begin. Thank you.

Endnote

1. This is an address delivered at the 12th annual conference of the Lasallian Association of Secondary School Chief Administrators (LASSCA), on 22 February 2016 in San Antonio, TX, USA.

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