

To Conduct, Together and by Association, Schools

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Introductory Remarks

As I prepared to speak with you this evening about this work we Lasallians do, together and by association, in schools, I found myself reminiscing about so many of the students who have populated my own life and touched my heart over the past nineteen years.

- Alison ... an attractive high school senior who had begun to date a thirty-something-year-old divorcée ... my own nervousness as I sought, as a young teacher, to help disentangle her from what was an inappropriate and potentially dangerous web of influence ... aligning myself with her hardworking single mother, who was doing her best to raise her daughter ... an experience that called to mind the words that John Baptist de La Salle wrote – some three hundred years ago – about parents needing help and of students like Alison, too often left on their own and so being formed primarily through "the bad example" of "their companions."³
- Ben ... a bright high school sophomore who was sent to talk to me because he was failing four of his classes and so was in danger of being expelled from school ... a youngster living with an alcoholic father who'd been experiencing some serious financial setbacks ... a divorcée whose alcoholic wife wanted nothing to do with either of them ... a kid who was floundering ... a youngster in need of some healthy adult interaction ... a fifteen year old hoping for a "miracle" at home and some help at school.⁴
- Carlos ... who wrote a few years ago of realizing that while in school he "was untouchable and rather comfortable with that. I was smart, and I was a star athlete, and I was wild; but I wasn't deep at all. I was well-liked by others, but I couldn't like myself." He wrote to thank me for not giving up on him. He said: "And then you entered my life and convinced me that I was good. At first, I thought that if I didn't respond to you you'd leave me alone. But you didn't give up on me ... You ... led me into a warmer and gentler world. I say this from my heart ... whenever someone tells me how good I am, I thank you."

Now I know that the word "miracle" conjures up images of multiplying bread and walking on water,⁵ but is it any less of a "miracle" to help young people know that they are both loved by God and good? Is it any less of a "miracle" to help young people grow in self-knowledge, self-discipline, and self-worth? This is, I suggest, the "miracle" you perform every day in your schools. For some youngsters, it is the needed reaffirmation of the values they're learning at home. For others, it is fulfilling the desperate need they have for someone to provide a corrective influence. It is, among other things, the opportunity to make the world of adults a more attractive and inviting possibility for some students.⁶

The “school is often the most influential social system impacting the lives of the young,”⁷ and the teacher, is often in a privileged position to influence positively the life of a youngster who comes from a troubled or dysfunctional family or who, even while coming from a seemingly well-functioning family, is still in danger of “falling between the cracks.”

I was one of those students who, for whatever reason, was in danger of “falling between the cracks.” I didn’t act up, but I needed help. Within me was “housed” that adolescent disconnect between a seemingly positive public perception and an inner world of turmoil and self-doubt; and I am here tonight to tell you that it was teachers just like yourselves who made a profound difference in my life and that I hope that each of you believes in the tremendous force for good you are and can be in the lives of the young people with whom you work.⁸

Together and by Association in Partnership

As we gather tonight to think about this work of conducting schools, it is against this kaleidoscope of images of students and parents in need that I want to make *a first point* about the Lasallian schools we conduct; and that point is that they are conducted in partnership.⁹

An Evolving Partnership

It is a partnership most often referenced – with that phrase from the time of John Baptist de La Salle and the first Brothers – as “conducting, together and by association, schools,” something which originally implied the Brothers of one local community working together in association with the Brothers of all of the other communities and which has, in these graced days, evolved to include the quite remarkable and energizing manner in which Brothers and lay teachers are partnering together to conduct schools.¹⁰

There is something new and dynamic about the way the partnership of Brothers and laity, in the spirit of De La Salle, is going forward. This collaboration is “growing and branching out in various directions and ... seems [in these days] to possess some unsuspected energy straining to break out.”¹¹ This movement of the laity ... both here in the USA and Canada ... but also in the Philippines, Italy, Argentina, and elsewhere ... who claim a share in the spiritual vision and heritage of John Baptist de La Salle and who believe that De La Salle still has something to offer to the modern experience ... is beginning to suggest previously unsuspected potentiality.

Sometimes Exhilarating but Seldom Easy

This partnership by which we “conduct, together and by association, schools” has always required intentionality and diligence. It has seldom been easy. During the early years of the Community in the seventeenth century, there was the emergence of a consensus among the first Brothers that running schools was a communal project.¹² The first Brothers – in a manner quite contrary to what was happening around them in the Little Schools of their day – appreciated that the conducting of their kind of school was something best done together in community with other kindred spirits.

There is great significance to the term “association,” the shorthand way in which we articulate this Lasallian core principle; and it is one rooted in the experience of De La Salle and the first Brothers. We sacrifice and collaborate, together and by association, for the temporal and eternal well-being of youngsters who are not, strictly speaking, our own.

Think for a moment of the year 1690-1691, a time of crisis for the first Christian Schools of John Baptist de La Salle. It appeared that the schools were doomed to collapse. A growing number of the first Brother teachers had withdrawn from the Community. No new teachers were applying for membership. The young teacher candidates joining the Community had become entangled in “ecclesiastical politics” and had withdrawn from the Community and decided to go home. The teacher-training program for country teachers had collapsed. The aggressive and hostile Masters of the Little Schools of Paris had taken De La Salle to court and had entered and seized the classroom furniture in the schools. De La Salle’s chief protégée had suddenly died, and De La Salle himself was so sick that he was, at one point, administered the Last Rites.¹³ It was within this context that John Baptist de La Salle, Nicolas Vuyart, and Gabriel Drolin – a small group who “all together and by common accord” – “vow association and union to procure and maintain” this important work “even when we shall be the only three to remain ... and we shall be obliged to beg for alms and to live on bread alone.”¹⁴

This is not the gesture of first fervor; the “heroic vow” is an act of hope, a prophetic response that “pierced the surrounding gloom.”¹⁵ They were together convinced that what they were doing [the work of these schools] was God’s holy work, and they had the confidence that God would not abandon them or their important work; and so, in the face of hardship and trial, they vow “association and union.”¹⁶

Characteristics of a Lasallian School

And now I want to make *a second point* about the Lasallian schools we conduct; and that point is that this thing [conducting schools] that we do, “together and by association,” is currently being realized through the lens of a deepening understanding about the characteristic qualities and identity of the Lasallian school.¹⁷

Schools Which Manifest God’s Love

The school, for De La Salle, is the work of a loving God,¹⁸ and teachers are God’s ministers.¹⁹ God loves us, and God wants us to know this.²⁰ He wants all to come to the knowledge of truth and be saved.²¹ For De La Salle, a quality school is the privileged context in which the Good News, which is on offer from God, can be heard and accepted.²² And our zeal for the “salvation” of those entrusted to our care is God’s goodness, and our faith, being made manifest.²³

Recall, if you would in this regard, the story of Jesus and the disciples of John the Baptist. In response to the question, “Are you the One who is to come or should we look for someone else?” Jesus replied: ‘Go back and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and good news is preached to the poor.’²⁴ Reaching out in care and concern – on behalf of someone else’s child²⁵ – and doing something about the blindness of ignorance, the nakedness of confusion, the

loneliness of despair, and the hunger for love, self-esteem, and competence ... this is faith overflowing in zealous action ... these are the “miracles” occurring in Lasallian schools, by God’s grace and your cooperation, every single day.

Schools Which Assist Parents

Assisting parents and guardians in the education and formation of children was the role of the schools of De La Salle in seventeenth-century France²⁶ and this continues to be our role today ... assisting parents so preoccupied with “the constant concern of earning the necessities of life”²⁷ ... single parents ... working parents ... assisting in the transformation of the lives of “the children of the artisans and the poor”²⁸ ... incarnating “in the flesh and blood world of my pupils, dying to myself, a *kenosis* even to the end of my life, so that the young may have life to the full and come to the glory which is their destiny”²⁹ ... not allowing youngsters to be claimed by the hedonism, self-centeredness, and consumerism of so much of modern culture ... not allowing them to be claimed by the chaos or random violence of urban settings ... “conducting, together and by association, schools” as the “ambassadors and ministers of Jesus Christ”³⁰ ... attempting to instill – as collaborators with divine providence – the values of unselfishness, service, sharing, compassion, honesty, and integrity instead of merely those attitudes of winning, grabbing, accumulating, consuming, and enjoying ... or, in the words of feminist family-therapist Claudia Bepko, “the need to evolve definitions of power within families [and schools] that support the values of cooperation, mutuality, generativity, and creativity rather than those of domination, competition, and materialism.”³¹

And this task of being an agent of transformation in the lives of the young is even more challenging for those of you who work with delinquents in child welfare institutions.³² What comes to mind in this regard is a story I recently came across ... “the image of a man trapped after a mining disaster” ... “deep in the earth, dark as night ... cut off and alone” ... the miner is clawing at rocks with his bare hands ... abandoned and without hope ... when “in the distance, the sounds of tapping are heard” ... at first, perhaps an illusion ... ultimately, the joyful sound of deliverance.³³ This is a powerful image in which we might understand so many delinquent youngsters buried under the “garbage” of so much hurt and failure ... so many shallow promises yielding disillusionment ... youngsters too often unsuccessfully attempting, in all sorts of self-destructive ways, to free themselves from the “prisons” in which they find themselves trapped ... and then they hear of you ... they sense you reaching out toward them ... as with intentionality and diligence, you become their ally and possibly even a “savior.”

Schools Which Are Built on Relationships

The characteristic way Lasallians have accomplished all of this, from the time of the origins,³⁴ is built on an underlying tripartite relational formula. The relationship of teacher with student is, first of all, its key. Teachers invite students into a new [or renewed] way of understanding the world around them and of being and relating to one another. Secondly, students are apprenticed and schooled, under our tutelage, in the practice of helping others. Learning is fundamentally something we do in cooperation with one another; knowledge is something to be shared. The teacher should never rob the students of the opportunity to do for themselves, or for one another, what they can accomplish on their own.³⁵ And, thirdly, the teacher-to-teacher relationship³⁶

provides the model in the Lasallian school of that which the students are being encouraged to emulate. “Example makes a much greater impression on the mind and heart than words.”³⁷ Our personal integrity, academic zeal, and good work habits ... the quality of our dealings with one another ... the mutuality, caring, respect, and collaboration manifest in our relationships ... “conducting, together and by association, schools” ... provides not only the model but also the credibility of the “invitation” the teacher proposes.

Schools Which Are Conducted Gratuitously

Another characteristic of the way in which these schools are conducted is that the schools are grounded in a deep sense of “gratuity,” a word which means “given or done free of charge.” The schools of De La Salle were conducted “gratuitously.”³⁸ It is not my intention tonight to focus on the gradual shift – over many years – away from economic gratuity.³⁹ Rather, my intention here is to highlight another deep meaning of “gratuity” for Lasallians.

“Gratuity” is an interior attitude fundamental to the teaching and evangelizing relationship; it is a hallmark of Lasallian schools and of the relationships that teachers have with students. “With joy, then, say as Saint Paul does, that the greatest cause of your joy in this life is to proclaim the Gospel free of charge, without having it cost anything to those who hear it.”⁴⁰ The faith that we have received is God’s free gift to us; and as it was given to us freely, it should be offered to others “free of charge and entirely for the glory of God.”⁴¹

Fairness, unbiased expectations, and un-preferential treatment of each and all is a hallmark of the relationship teachers have with students. “Guard against any human attitude toward your disciples,” writes De La Salle.⁴² “Show no partiality for any of the students, admiring only their piety, without paying attention to anything that is agreeable or attractive in their appearance.”⁴³ Furthermore, he goes as far as to propose that the Brother teachers, at their annual retreat, should examine themselves about

whether you have not neglected some students because they were the slowest, or the poorest; whether you did not show favoritism toward others because they were rich, or pleasant, or naturally possessing more loveable qualities than others.⁴⁴

We all know that this deep sense of spiritual and professional “gratuity” is not always so easy to achieve, and so we need one another’s support and re-directing correction. We need “a community of the faculty” where each one might “constantly rekindle their own conviction from the common flame ... bringing to each one a collective enthusiasm.”⁴⁵ We need one another if we are to do well this ministry that has been entrusted to us, and so it is that we conduct schools together and by association.

Schools Which Are Mutually Transformational of Teachers and Students

In writing of “the relationship of Brothers and students,” Brother Miguel Campos in his introduction to the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* states,

the Brother and students mutually educate one another to live the Gospel in their daily

lives not only verbally but in the interaction of the words and deeds of teacher and students.⁴⁶

The Founder believed that Jesus Christ speaks to the teachers through their students. We hear in them the invitation to draw closer to God. This is what De La Salle meant when he wrote: “you can be assured that if you act this way [with an ardent zeal] for their salvation, God himself will take responsibility for yours.”⁴⁷ Our efforts on behalf of a more full and glorious life for our students work a transformation in our own lives as we attempt to model for them, in word and deed, the values we propose for emulation. This is not a matter of mysterious and passive transformation. This was De La Salle’s own experience with the first Brother teachers. In proclaiming the Gospel to others, the Gospel lays claim on our own hearts. Through them and for the sake of the Gospel, God gradually refashions us into the image of his Son.⁴⁸

Lasallian education is, when all is said and done, a process of mutual transformation. We both teach and are taught. We help change their lives, and they help transform ours. This is the dynamic and evangelical unity of “conducting, together and by association, schools.”

Conclusion

So, by way of conclusion, I remind you that ours is a holy work and that, consequently, the school is holy ground. Recall, in this regard, the words God spoke to Moses on Mount Horeb:

Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground ... I have indeed seen the distress of my people ... I have heard them crying out ... I have come down to rescue them.⁴⁹

Tough street kids at the time of the origins in seventeenth-century France or the youngsters today in our urban and suburban schools⁵⁰ ought, in the words of De La Salle, to be shown the “solicitude ... you would show for the children of a king.”⁵¹ “Engender Jesus Christ in their hearts.”⁵² “Look upon the children God has entrusted to you,” De La Salle writes, “as the children of God himself.”⁵³ “Recognize Jesus beneath the poor rags of those whom you have to instruct.”⁵⁴

And so this weekend as we come together to examine what we do “together and by association,” I exhort you, in the words of the Founder:

You must not doubt that it is a great gift of God, this grace he has given you to be entrusted with the instruction of children, to announce the Gospel to them, and to bring them up in the Christian spirit ... It is God who has called you, who has destined you for this work, and who has sent you to work in his vineyard. Fulfill your ministry, then, with all the affection of your heart, working entirely for him.⁵⁵

Endnotes

1. This keynote address was delivered in Chicago on November 17, 1988, at the 18th Annual Huether Education Conference; and it has been edited a bit for publication. The Lasallian expression “to conduct together and by association schools ...” can be found in the *Vow Formula of 1694* and *The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (Rome, 1987), #25.

2. Brother William Mann, who holds a Doctor of Ministry degree from Colgate Rochester Divinity School (1990), serves as the president of Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota since 2008 and as the president of the International Association of Lasallian Universities (IALU) since 2015. He is a former vicar general of the Brothers of the Christian Schools (2000-2007). From 1984 to 1990, he served as the director of novices of the Brothers of the Christian Schools in Skaneateles, NY.

3. *Meditation* #194.1.

4. I have often wondered if he didn’t get himself in trouble precisely so he could spend some “quality” one-on-one time with responsible adults who were focused on his needs.

5. Cf. *Matthew* 14:13-33.

6. In Paul Zindel’s novel *The Pigman*, we have a fictional presentation of the adult world through the eyes of adolescents. The boy John refers to his parents as “bore” and “the old lady.” The attention John doesn’t get at home is provided by a widower who has befriended a baboon at the local zoo. John’s adolescent worldview is captured in these words: “She thinks she knows everything that goes on inside me, and she doesn’t know a thing. What did she want from me – to tell the truth all the time? To run around saying that it did matter to me that I live in a world where you can grow old and be alone and have to get down on your hands and knees and beg for friends? A place where people just sort of forget about you because you get a little old and your mind’s a bit senile or silly? Did she think that didn’t bother me underneath? ... Didn’t she know how sick to my stomach it made me feel to know it’s possible to end your life with only a baboon to talk to?” [*The Pigman* (New York: Bantam Books, 1968), page 144]. This is a view not altogether dissimilar from the curious metaphor Arthur Miller puts into the mouth of his character Willy Lowman in the play *The Death of a Salesman*: “You can’t eat the orange and throw the peel away – a man is not a piece of fruit!” (1949).

7. Source noted but unidentified.

8. For many parents and guardians, you become the ally they’re hoping for when you give that extra bit of help with their kids.

9. “Brotherhood” was and remains a key element of De La Salle’s foundational vision of education; ours is an educational network founded on the principle of fraternal collaboration and partnership. Since the 39th General Chapter of 1966-1967 and its decision, in light of Vatican Council II, to allow and embrace “co-education,” we now more appropriately speak in the

schools we conduct of a spirit of brotherhood and sisterhood.

10. As encouraged as I am with this growing insight and reality of partnership, I believe a more fundamental partnership is currently being overlooked, or eclipsed, in this evolution. The primacy of the partnership with parents as the first educators of their children – parents who invite our involvement and collaboration in the education of their children – needs to find a voice and a place in this evolving understanding of partnership in Lasallian schools.

11. Source noted but unidentified.

12. This was predominantly an age of individual instruction. While belonging to a Guild, the Writing Masters worked one-by-one in their teaching of penmanship; and the Little Schools, which were not to be too close to one another, operated with one Master instructing a group of pupils one at a time.

13. Cf. *Saint John Baptist de La Salle* by William Battersby (New York: Macmillan Company, 1958), pages 107-119.

14. *The Heroic Vow of 1691*.

15. Source noted but unidentified.

16. In the face of the imminent demise of the Christian Schools, these three reaffirm their “resolve which for years had already guided their actions and their lives.”

17. Cf. *Characteristics of Lasallian Schools* by USA Regional Education Committee (Christian Brothers Publications, 1986): a) the teacher as minister of grace, b) association, and c) the management of schools; and *Characteristics of a Lasallian School Today* by International Education Committee (Rome, 1987): a) attentive to the needs of the young, b) especially the poor, c) they associate, d) in a fraternal atmosphere, e) in order that the school “should function well,” f) and in order to exercise their educational ministry, g) in the Church, and h) in creative fidelity to the charism of the Founder.

18. “God cannot truly desire this [that all come to the knowledge of truth and be saved] without providing the means for it and, therefore, without giving children the teachers who will assist them in the fulfillment of his plan ... and you are the ones who he has chosen to help in this work,” *Meditation* #193.3.

19. “Let it be clear, then, in all your conduct toward the children who are entrusted to you, that you regard yourselves as the ministers of God, carrying out your ministry with love and a sincere and true zeal, accepting with much patience the difficulties you have to suffer, willing to be despised by men and to be persecuted, even to give your life for Jesus in the fulfillment of your ministry,” *Meditation* #201.1.

20. A more equitable share of this world’s resources [by benefit of a quality education] becomes the context in which some young people are awakened to the Good News that Jesus

Christ has come to bring fullness of life for all (*John* 10:10). A recent article about a seventeen-year-old graduate of my own *alma mater* who was brutally and meaninglessly murdered as he came home from school one day highlighted this very point. The quality of the total education and the atmosphere of the school provide not only the context in which “higher expectations” can be heard but also the portal for very real, tangible, experienced “higher expectations.” Cf. “Higher Expectations’ in the Catholic Inner City High School” by William Harkins in *Momentum* 18 (February 1987), page 12.

21. Cf. *Meditation* #193.3.

22. A difference between the Catholic understanding of salvation and its Protestant alternative concerns the role each person plays in one’s own salvation. De La Salle would say that only the act of our human will can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. “The grace which Jesus Christ merited for us effects our salvation insofar as our will is brought to correspond with it,” *Meditation* #195.1. Cf. *Meditation* #194.3.

23. Cf. *Meditation* #201.1 and #201.3.

24. *Matthew* 11:1-5.

25. Cf. *Meditation* #110 (Saint Joseph).

26. “You must, then, look upon your work as one of the most important and most necessary services in the Church, one which has been entrusted to you by pastors, by fathers and mothers,” *Meditation* #199.1. Given the audience of school administrators and teachers with whom these remarks were shared and the desired emphasis on home-school collaboration, the focus of the remarks was intentionally restricted to the relationship of teachers with parents and guardians. Cf. *Meditation* #157.1, *Meditation* #193.2, and *Meditation* #194.1.

27. *Meditation* #193.2.

28. Cf. *The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (Rome, 1987), #1.

29. “Introduction” by Miguel Campos in *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* (Christian Brothers Conference, 1975), page 43.

30. *Meditation* #195.2.

31. “Mary and John: Power, Power, Who’s Got the Power?” by Claudia Bepko in *Family Therapy Networker*, Vol. 9 (6), November-December 1985, pages 47-49.

32. For example, Ocean Tides School in Rhode Island, Saint Gabriel’s Hall in Pennsylvania, and La Salle School in New York, a tradition of educationally grounded “child welfare” work reaching back to Saint Yon (1702).

33. Cf. Lutheran Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Advent Sermon delivered from a pulpit in London in 1933.

34. Cf. *The Conduct of Schools* by John Baptist de La Salle (1720).

35. The more gifted readers modeled "good reading" for those who were struggling. Those with a bit more bread to eat for breakfast shared in the "bread collection" with those not having sufficient food. Students were carefully paired on the classroom benches by the teacher. Numerous students served as "class officers" who assisted in the good running of the classroom.

36. "Brotherhood" was understood by De La Salle and the first Brother teachers as being "brothers to one another and older brothers to the students."

37. *Meditation* #202.3.

38. Cf. *Memoir on the Habit* (1689) and *Vow Formula of 1694*. Also, "The Brothers will not receive from their pupils or their parents any money or presents, however small, on any day or occasion whatsoever," *Rule of 1705*, #7.11; and "Have you accepted anything from your pupils? You know that this is in no way permitted," *Meditation* #92.3.

39. The Founder spent much time and energy – with benefactors, pastors, and those who financed care and education for the artisans and the poor in cities and towns – assuring necessary funding to run the schools gratuitously.

40. *Meditation* #207.2, referencing *I Corinthians* 9:18.

41. *Meditation* #194.1, referencing teaching more specifically; but see also, *Meditation* #196.3: "What have you in this regard that has not been given to you? And if it has been given to you, why are you boasting as if you had it on your own?" And in *Meditation* #194.1, De La Salle reminds us that we are merely "stewards of the wealth God has entrusted to us and of the talents which he has given us to work in his service."

42. *Meditation* #196.3.

43. *Meditation* #157.3 (Saint Joachim).

44. *Meditation* #206.1.

45. Source noted but unidentified.

46. "Introduction" by Miguel Campos in *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* (Christian Brothers Conference, 1975), page 23.

47. *Meditation* #205.2.

48. Cf. “Brothers in the Church” by William Mann in *Review for Religious*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (May/June 1987), pages 333-334.

49. *Exodus* 3:5-8.

50. Cf. *The Prince of Tides* (Houghton Mifflin, 1986), a best-selling novel by Pat Conroy about two siblings, an author and a high school coach, and the freeing up of deeply hidden stories – a dysfunctional and traumatic childhood – that remain, into adulthood, the obstacles to living a full and joyful life. The hard work of assisting folks such as these is, also, captured in *Meditation* #201.3: “For this had to be the kind of ardent zeal you had for the salvation of those you have to instruct, when you were led to sacrifice yourself and to spend your whole life to give these children a Christian education and to procure for them the life of grace in this world and eternal life in the next.”

51. *Meditation* #133.2 (Saint Margaret, Queen of Scotland).

52. *Meditation* #157.1 (Saint Joachim).

53. *Meditation* #133.2 (Saint Margaret, Queen of Scotland).

54. *Meditation* #96.3.

55. *Meditation* #201.1.