

The Brothers' School: Six Characteristics

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The purpose of this [brief essay] is to acquaint the reader with the seven institutions of higher education in the United States which are sponsored by the Brothers of the Christian Schools, more commonly known as the Christian Brothers.³ The six colleges and one university are as varied in their academic makeup as they are in their geographic locations scattered across the nation. However, they each share one most distinctive bond, the commitment to educational quality within the [De La Salle] Christian Brother tradition, a tradition now over 300 years old.⁴

The Christian Brothers⁵

The Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, commonly called the Christian Brothers in the United States and the De La Salle Brothers in the rest of the English-speaking world, was founded in 1680 in the city of Rheims in France by Saint John Baptist de La Salle.⁶ All of the members of the congregation are Brothers devoted exclusively to the work of Christian education. As Brothers, these men are not priests and do not engage in the ministries proper to the ordained clergy. The Brothers do take vows and try in every way to keep alive the spirit of brotherhood among themselves and in relationships with their students.

At the time of their foundation, the Brothers devoted themselves in a special way to the task of providing a sound elementary education for the children of the artisans and the poor who otherwise would have been left without any formal education at all. De La Salle and the early Brothers pioneered in many educational practices that are taken for granted today: simultaneous instruction, instruction given in the vernacular rather than in Latin, special attention to the basic skills of reading and writing, insistence on regular attendance, classroom discipline, and sound habits of mental and physical hygiene. By the time of the French Revolution, the Christian Schools of the Brothers had already effected a revolution of sorts in the field of popular education all over France.

A new era in the history of the Brothers began with the restoration after the French Revolution. Other Institutes of teaching Brothers, modeled more or less on the De La Salle congregation, were founded to supply the educational needs of a revitalized Church. The followers of De La Salle meanwhile began to extend their educational mission to all parts of the world, including the United States where the first permanent foundation was opened in Baltimore in 1845.

At first the Brothers in this country concentrated their efforts on parish schools and welfare institutions designed to provide an elementary education for the children of the immigrant generation of American Catholics. But soon the American bishops, anxious to develop a well-educated laity and a strong native clergy, asked the Brothers to extend their mission to secondary schools and, in short order, to institutions of higher learning as well.

Within ten years of the original foundation in Baltimore, Christian Brothers College in St. Louis was empowered to grant academic degrees (1855), to be followed soon after by Manhattan College in New York and La Salle College in Philadelphia (both chartered in 1863). In addition to the other Brothers Colleges that have survived, the Brothers at one time or another conducted colleges in Ellicott City, Baltimore, Washington, DC, and Scranton. American Brothers have also been instrumental in the establishment and operation of De La Salle University in Manila and Bethlehem University in [Palestine]. With the exception, perhaps, of La Salle University in Mexico City, and some teacher-training colleges in other parts of the world, these ventures into higher education at the university level are unique to the Brothers in the United States.⁷

Along with this involvement in higher education, the Brothers continue to conduct quality secondary schools in most of the major American cities. Brothers are still involved as they always have been in parish schools and welfare institutions. In recent years they have associated themselves more and more with devoted and talented lay teachers who share their sense of mission and the Lasallian spirit. The Brothers have extended their educational vision beyond the school and now engage in various forms of adult education, supervise diocesan and parish programs in religious education, and are active in campus ministry and similar ventures. Throughout the world, and in the United States in particular, the Brothers have been able in this way to preserve the spirit and heritage of their Founder and, at the same time, adapt to new and creative challenges that the contemporary world presents to their specific mission in the field of Christian education.

The Brothers' School⁸

The variety of educational enterprises conducted by the Brothers, as well as the uniformity of standards and structures that characterize American educational institutions, make it difficult to isolate whatever it is that is distinctive about a school conducted by the Brothers. Nevertheless, it might be possible to suggest six elements which, if taken together, constitute the concrete reality we call the Brothers' school.

The *first* of these is *sensitivity to social issues*. That is the reason that brought the Institute of the Brothers into being in the first place. If the social problems of today's world are no less acute than they were in the time of De La Salle, they are more complex and less susceptible to direct and easy solution. Nevertheless, the Brothers try to give priority to direct educational service to the poor where that is still possible. Where it is not, the Brothers try in all of their educational endeavors to show special concern for the disadvantaged and to make education for social justice an important element in the curriculum and in extracurricular activities. That is what the Brothers mean when they take a special vow of "service to the poor through education."

A *second* but not secondary quality of the Brothers' school is *the importance given to religious education*. This, too, means something different than it did in seventeenth-century France. In the American context, respect for religious freedom leads the Brothers to a somewhat different approach to religious education, one that takes into account the varying needs and experiences of the student in order to open them to Gospel values and to bring to maturity their personal faith commitment within the Catholic tradition.

Thirdly, the Brothers' school is committed in a special way to *excellence in teaching*. One of the principal achievements of John Baptist de La Salle was to elevate the despised function of the schoolteacher to the status of a vocation worthy of the dedication of a lifetime. Devoted exclusively to the work of education, the Brothers bring to a school this sense of permanence, commitment and professional competence in the entire teaching staff, both the Brothers themselves and the lay teachers associated with them.

A **fourth** characteristic is *an accent on quality education*. From the beginning, the gratuitous schools of the Brothers, designed to serve the poorer classes, soon began to attract those who could afford to go elsewhere. That was because the Christian School of the Brothers got to be known as "the best school in town." While that may be a slight exaggeration in many places today, the Brothers still enjoy a reputation for running good schools. For this reason, their graduates pride themselves on being called "Brothers' boys."⁹

As a **fifth** element, the education given in the Brothers' school *emphasizes the practical*. That too is an inheritance from the vision and experience of the Founder. Even the high schools and colleges conducted by the Brothers tend more than others to parallel instruction in the theoretical disciplines with pre-professional training in fields that will help the students to face the harsh realities of earning a living in today's world.

The **sixth** characteristic is the most subtle of all, but something quite distinctive and very real. Although instinctively loyal to the Roman Church, and respectful of the dignity and functions of the priesthood, the Brothers have managed to keep their schools at *a certain independent distance from Church authority*. By definition the Brothers are excluded from the mainstream of ecclesiastical politics and theological disputes. Thus, as themselves lay religious, they can more easily identify with their lay colleagues, students and parents and so understand better and support movements to give laymen and laywomen a greater role in the life of the Church.

The Brothers are well aware that many other schools manifest many of the same characteristics enumerated above. But the six of them taken together seem to be the best way to describe that elusive something that the community recognizes as the Brothers' school.

Endnotes

1. This brief essay, written by Brother Luke, appeared in a twelve-page document entitled *The Seven Christian Brothers' Colleges in the United States; 1983 – 1984*. A short one-page profile of each of the seven institutions (cf. endnote #3) is found in the document.

2. Brother Luke Salm (1921-2009) was a professor of religious studies at Manhattan College for more than half a century. He was the first religious Brother and non-cleric to earn a doctorate in theology (STD) at The Catholic University of America (1955). He was an elected delegate of the District of New York to the 39th, 40th, 41st, and 42nd General Chapters of the Brothers of the Christian Schools; and he was a noted historian of the life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle.

3. Christian Brothers College (Tennessee), College of Santa Fe (New Mexico), La Salle College (Pennsylvania), Lewis University (Illinois), Manhattan College (New York), Saint Mary's College (California), and Saint Mary's College (Minnesota).

4. The material presented in this first paragraph appeared as the text on page two of the original document.

5. The material presented under the title "The Christian Brothers" appeared as the text on page three of the original document.

6. Cf. *The Work Is Yours: The Life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle* by Luke Salm (Landover, MD: Christian Brothers Publications, 1989 [Second Edition, 1996]).

7. In 2016, sixty-one institutions of higher learning self-identify as Lasallian and are recognized as such as members of the International Association of Lasallian Universities (IALU).

8. The material presented under the title of "The Brothers' School" appeared as the text on page eleven of the original document. After the 41st General Chapter of the Brothers of the Christian Schools (1986), Superior General Brother John Johnston rather deliberately helped shift the term "Brothers' School" to that of "Lasallian School" in deference to the fact that the vast majority of those working in these schools were no longer De La Salle Christian Brothers.

9. For many generations of graduates of the schools conducted by the Brothers, this is the case. In more recent years, younger graduates would probably better understand themselves as "Lasallians."