

The Ministerial Spirituality of De La Salle: An Exercise in Interpretation

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Presenting De La Salle's spiritual teaching in a unified and coherent way is always a challenge given that the Founder never got around to producing a synthesis of his spiritual doctrine. To read his work is to find tremendous spiritual insights scattered here and there like gems on the floor of a treasure cave. In the absence of a Lasallian *summa*, it follows that any attempt to arrive at a synthesis of the Founder's spiritual teachings must necessarily be *creative* as well as reconstructive. This present essay then is an exercise in creative interpretation – an attempt to discern and interpret the underlying *gestalt* which organizes the Founder's ideas on the spiritual life into a coherent whole. It is the author's hope that the present exercise will benefit not just those who have to present the Founder's works to various publics, but most especially those who want to understand and walk this spiritual path themselves.

A Ministerial Spirituality

What we call Lasallian spirituality today grew out of the lived experience of a community of schoolmasters in 17th-century France who came to understand themselves as being called by God to bring the good news of salvation to poor and abandoned youth through schools accessible to the poor. By integrating quality education with a solid Christian formation, they enabled their pupils to rise up from the situation of deprivation in which circumstances had placed them and to live their vocation as exemplary members of civil society and the Church.

St. John Baptist de La Salle directed his spiritual teaching almost exclusively to the formation of these schoolmasters. He wanted them to see their work not merely as a profession but as a vocation and themselves not simply as teachers but as ministers of Christ and co-workers with God in the salvation and liberation of young people. For De La Salle and his followers, the work of teaching and forming the young in the Christian spirit was both the context and means of growth in the life of grace. For this reason, their spirituality is properly called *ministerial*. What characterizes a ministerial spirituality is described in this excerpt from the *New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*:

Called by God from the community and empowered by the Holy Spirit for service, the ministering person finds holiness by ever integrating prayer and apostolic activity within the horizon of sharing here and now in Christ's ministry to those in need of God's love and care. Listening to God's word, surrounded by the needs of one's brothers and sisters, those who minister strive ever more fully to conform their minds and hearts to the pattern of Christ's gracious concern for all. Sustained by the presence of the Lord as the one who ministers in every situation and ever graced by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, ministering persons are able, in union with Christ, to lay down their lives in daily service. Through the gift of themselves in faithful love, they believe that those who are served will indeed, by God's grace, come to share in the fullness of the kingdom by experiencing the gift of new life that flows from the paschal mystery.¹

Openness to the Spirit, the contemplation of both God's Word and the needs of the poor, the integration of the spiritual life within the context of service, participation in Christ's ministry, conformity to the mind and heart of Christ, reliance on the Spirit – all themes we find De La Salle returning to again and again in his spiritual writings – leave no doubt that Lasallian spirituality is essentially ministerial.

In the present work, the author takes up five key themes of De La Salle's spiritual teaching: 1) that educators are co-workers with God in his plan of salvation; 2) that the spirit of faith is the foundational principle of the Christian educator's life; 3) that teachers incarnate Christ in their ministry by uniting themselves to Christ in his spirit and virtues; 4) that abandonment to the Spirit is the precondition for ministerial fruitfulness; 5) that the total gift of oneself to God is lived out in an evangelical brotherhood that points to the final reconciliation of all things in Christ. By examining and linking these themes together, the author hopes that the reader will come away with a better grasp of the "integrating pattern" of Lasallian spirituality.

1. We Are Co-Workers with GOD in God's Plan of Salvation

God's Plan: Context of Our Ministry

Lasallian spirituality entails a consciousness that all the events of our lives form part of a larger story – the ongoing drama of what God the Father is accomplishing in the world through the Risen Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. St. Paul refers to this larger story as the "mysterion" – God's plan for liberating creation from the bondage of sin in order to reconcile it to himself.² From the perspective of faith, De La Salle invites teachers to see their life and work within the context of God's saving plan.³

While God created humankind to know, love and serve him, sin alienates human beings not only from God but from their true identity as beings created to reflect God's love and goodness in the world. Though human hearts are made for God and incline towards him, sin diverts this primal longing into an anxious quest for what ultimately fails to satisfy. Caught up in the pursuit of an illusory happiness, humanity yearns for liberation from its fruitless striving and an end to its spiritual exile. Thus in the mystery of the Incarnation, the Eternal Word took human form in Jesus in order to embrace sinners and lead them home to the heart of God.

Jesus reveals both God to us and us to ourselves. God's true nature is most clearly disclosed on the cross where humanity's rejection of God was disarmed by Jesus' loving obedience-unto-death. In that moment when the Crucified One implored forgiveness for his executioners, the Triune God was most tellingly revealed as a gratuitous proffer of mercy embracing human beings at their worst. Simultaneously, Jesus' sacrifice on the cross revealed the magnanimity of which the human heart is capable: the total embrace, through loving obedience, of God's saving will irrespective of consequences to oneself. In Jesus' sacrificial love-unto-death, human beings thus glimpse both God's relentless mercy and the fullest possible human response.

But for Jesus' sacrifice to become effective, the good news of God's mercy has to be proclaimed in a manner that awakens in human hearts a corresponding welcome, love and commitment. To believe the good news is not merely a matter of intellectual assent – it is about entrusting oneself to the God of Jesus and allowing this God to reshape one's vision, desires, commitments and

character. For this purpose, the Spirit raises up prophets and apostles in every age to proclaim the gospel in word and deed.

Turning from the contemplation of God's plan to consider the actual situation of impoverished children, De La Salle was struck by the tragedy of the latter's circumstances. He recognized that their marginalization from the Church and respectable society made a fruitful encounter with the good news highly unlikely. For many of them, life was a struggle to survive from one day to the next; and the lack of a suitable education made it unlikely that this would ever change. In other cases, prolonged exposure to the hardships of the streets had left their souls crippled and maimed; their hearts hardened and their consciences deformed and calloused. In many cases, parents were too busy earning a living to see to their needs. As a result, even those barely in their teens were wont to pick up vices like drinking, gambling, thievery, and sexual impropriety. Left to themselves, they were headed for spiritual death – if not in fact an actual one due to hunger, disease, and the general brutality of life on the streets. As he was drawn into their world, De La Salle's heart went out to them; and his prayer led him to recognize a similar pathos in the very heart of God.

De La Salle's own spiritual experience left him with no doubt that the Father longed to free these children to live according to their dignity as his beloved children and heirs. Just as his own zeal to rescue them had been kindled quite in spite of himself, by circumstances and the work of grace, De La Salle imagined the Father sending the Spirit to kindle a similar fire in the hearts of those who would teach and liberate these children from their bondage to poverty, sin and ignorance.⁴ Through the ministry they exercised, these teachers would extend to these children the mercy and compassion that flows from the cross. By word and deed, instruction and example, they would bring the gift of salvation to these young people, leading the latter to live as true Christians and responsible citizens.⁵

De La Salle regarded the establishment of Christian schools as God's response to the human and spiritual distress of the young, the work of divine providence.⁶ The Christian school was to be a place where God's redemptive love in Christ was both communicated and made effective in the concern of teachers for their pupils. It was to be a community where the good news of salvation was being realized day by day as those neglected, oppressed and inured to vice were initiated into a qualitatively different form of existence based on faith, mutual respect, and fraternal charity. It was to be a place of discipleship where students strove to acquire the Christian spirit, live the evangelical counsels, and learned to carry on Christ's work in the world. The specifically Christian dimension of the educator's role lay in leading the young to surrender their hearts to God and to acquire the spirit and virtues of Jesus.⁷ In De La Salle's thinking, this evangelical dimension of education oriented the entire life of the school and could not be dissociated from the school's more secular activities and offerings.⁸ Through the guardianship of educators who modeled themselves on the Good Shepherd of the gospels,⁹ the school was to become a zone of liberation, a novitiate for Christian living, a sign and instrument of salvation.

It was this drama, this ongoing story of salvation, that De La Salle wanted his disciples to recognize as unfolding in their own lives. In so doing, he invited his disciples to claim their profession as a vocation and to cooperate with God in the realization of the divine plan.

Insofar as educators today imbibe this same faith-consciousness, they ought to make no distinction between working for their own sanctification and carrying out their professional duties.¹⁰ Their path to holiness takes the form of loving and serving to the best of their ability those entrusted to them by God. The asceticism of the teacher's path lies in the daily sacrifice that loving fidelity to one's pupils entails. It lies in letting go of interior attachments that block the action of the indwelling Spirit and prevent one from serving them as the mission requires. It lies in surrendering oneself to the Spirit so that the Spirit may work miracles in the lives of those they teach and guide. It means sparing nothing to assure that every pupil experiences in a deep and personal way, that he or she is loved by God. Thus, it is by educating the young and sacrificing to make them holy that teachers themselves are made holy; likewise, by becoming holy, teachers become more effective witnesses and guides to those they educate.¹¹

2. Living by the Spirit of Faith in the Presence of God

De La Salle rejected in practice the kind of religiosity that restricts the divine presence and action to explicitly religious times, activities and places. This mindset, typical of devotional spirituality, often fosters a kind of "spiritual apartheid" that separates the religious dimension of life from all other aspects of human existence.¹² The reality, of course, is that nothing in creation exists as separate from God who loves and holds all things in being. The divorce between God and humankind does not occur on the level of being, but on the level of consciousness and willing. The challenge then is to live in the awareness of what is already the case – that union with God is not a goal to be achieved but a reality to which we need to awaken and in which we need to participate actively. Those who believe this are poised to recognize God's presence and action in creation and to respond to the invitations of the Spirit in all the events of life.

The Spirit of Faith

To arrive at this awareness requires cultivating *the spirit of faith*, which De La Salle identifies as the distinctive and essential spirit of his Institute. The spirit of faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit that leads to progressive knowledge, love, imitation and union with Christ.¹³ It enables one to understand and judge things with the mind and heart of Christ ("seeing with the eyes of faith" in Lasallian parlance), to respond to the Spirit's invitations in all the duties and demands of the present moment ("doing all things in view of God"), and to accept and cooperate with God's will as it is manifested in both the joys and struggles of life ("attributing all to God").¹⁴ Taken together, these three dimensions of the spirit of faith (Christian vision, action and passion) integrate all aspects of human life – all one knows, does, and suffers – within the horizon of faith.¹⁵ Holiness thus consists in actively embracing God's will as it is manifested in the challenges of the present moment, in all the situations of life, in all one does and suffers. All holiness is ultimately summed up in the prayer of Jesus at Gethsemane: "Not my will but yours be done."¹⁶

Acquiring the Spirit of Faith

The Founder describes the spirit of faith as being "directed and governed in everything by the maxims and sentiments of faith taken principally from the Sacred Scriptures."¹⁷ To appreciate what this means, we need to examine some of its theological underpinnings.

The Eternal Word that became flesh in Jesus is the same Word expressed in the inspired words of sacred scripture. For this reason, the Church holds that all scripture ultimately points to Christ, his person and message, his wisdom, his mind and heart, as its underlying principle of unity. In this light, the spirit of faith may be understood as a kind of sharing in the “Christ-consciousness” which permeates sacred scripture and which is most clearly revealed in the New Testament. This sharing is made possible on our end by an intimate familiarity with scripture and on God’s end by the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Openness to Word and Spirit especially in the context of prayer allows us to grasp the internal logic of the gospel message in a way that transforms our understanding, our attitudes, our motives and desires. Thus the Founder invites his disciples to encounter Christ in sacred scripture on a daily basis and to enter into Christ’s views and attitudes so that their own subjectivity might be shaped by Christ’s. For the Founder, it was no exaggeration to say that deprived of this “Christ-consciousness,” the deep personal knowledge of God and God’s ways that comes through familiarity with scripture and the work of grace, one is blind to what pertains to one’s own salvation and to the salvation of those for whom one bears responsibility.¹⁸ It is because of this that De La Salle recommends daily reflection on scripture, particularly the New Testament, as the primary means of growing in the spirit of faith.

But the spirit of faith is not merely an understanding of God and his ways. It is a total commitment of oneself to the God of Jesus, a way of being, acting and living “for God alone.”¹⁹ For this reason, De La Salle suggests cultivating receptivity to the Holy Spirit by often recalling God’s presence and by performing all one’s actions for God from motives of faith.²⁰ Like any virtue, the spirit of faith grows as one acts on it, attending to the invitations of the Spirit in everyday events and performing one’s duties or bearing one’s sufferings for God. He further suggests maintaining spiritual focus through an asceticism of the mind and the senses as indulging these faculties indiscriminately can lead to distraction and loss of one’s sense of connectedness to God.²¹

Integral to living in God’s presence is the practice of interior prayer. Now De La Salle’s instruction on prayer charts a continuum from a discursive mode wherein human effort predominates towards a silent, receptive mode of attentiveness to the divine indwelling. At the beginning of his method, De La Salle gives much attention to entering into the awareness of God’s presence and sustaining this awareness through multiple reflections and acts. This leads to the centerpiece of the Founder’s method which is the prayerful consideration of Jesus with the intention of taking on Jesus’ views, attitudes and virtues. The finality of this spiritual exercise is clear: conformity to the pattern of Christ in his total abandonment to the Father and his loving concern for all.

However, the dynamics of the method and the workings of grace often lead to a contemplative mode of prayer which the Founder calls “simple attention.”²² This prayer consists in “remaining before God with a simple, faith-inspired awareness that He is truly present.”²³ It is a prayer of silence, stillness, and pure receptivity. In this prayer, one descends to that wellspring where the human spirit and God’s Spirit meet and intermingle so closely as to be indistinguishable. At this point one comes to realize as did St. Catherine of Genoa – “My deepest me is God!”²⁴ – a realization which as it deepens, gradually translates in one’s life and ministry into a oneness with the Father and the Son in love, will and work.

3. Interiorizing the Spirit and Virtues of Jesus

Conforming to the Spirit and Virtues of Christ

As with all those associated with the French School of spirituality²⁵ and indeed with the piety of 17th-century French Catholicism, De La Salle tended towards a somewhat dim view of human nature.²⁶ He believed, along with most churchmen of his day, that left to themselves and deprived of grace, humans are incapable of accomplishing anything of any real salvific value. It is Jesus who, by corresponding completely in his being and manner of living to the will of the Father, restores to humanity the prospect of growth in the divine likeness and the possibility of participation in God's saving work. It is union with the Risen Christ in the Holy Spirit that makes one's efforts to do good bear fruit. This doctrine, which rests on Pauline foundations,²⁷ is the basis for the familiar Lasallian prayer "Live, Jesus in our hearts!" which De La Salle urged all his disciples to say at the start and end of every activity during the day.

In the teaching of De La Salle, the process of sanctification requires an interior union and conformity to the spirit and virtues of Jesus Christ.²⁸ The Jesus of the gospels, who lived in perfect correspondence to the Father's will, is both the model of holiness to which human beings must be conformed and, together with the Holy Spirit, the origin and source of this transformation. For the French School, outward behavior flows from the transformation of mind and heart through grace and the interiorization of Christ's attitudes and virtues. By actively seeking this interior conformity with Christ, one becomes through the action of the Spirit, a living sacrament or incarnation of the Lord one contemplates.²⁹ In this manner, one begins to live the reality behind St. Paul's words, "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me."³⁰

Now in the view of the French School, the words, deeds and virtues of Christ as set forth in sacred scripture have enduring power because they express the pattern of attitude, feeling, and action to which human beings must conform in order to be united with the Risen Lord.³¹ This is why De La Salle continually invites his disciples to turn to the gospels and "imitate" or "enter into" the particular "spirit" (attitude, sentiment, disposition) of Christ's words, virtues, and saving acts with an eye to acquiring this spirit for oneself. As one prayerfully enters into Christ's attitudes and dispositions, the mind and heart of Christ expressed in the gospels illumines and reshapes one's way of thinking, feeling and acting. This movement is expressed most clearly, as we have already noted, in De La Salle's method of interior prayer which consists in focusing on a virtue, maxim or mystery in Christ's life in order to interiorize its particular "spirit."³² The grace of the Holy Spirit transforms one's character as one examines oneself in the light of Christ's example and implores divine assistance in striving to embody this virtue or attitude in daily living. This cooperation with Jesus' Spirit heals and elevates human nature as the divine likeness intended by the Creator and exemplified by Christ is gradually restored to the disciple. In this manner, the teacher comes to represent Christ to the young in the fullest possible way.

United With Christ in His Ministry

The ministry of Christian educators is a union and participation in the life of Christ; efforts at service will bear fruit insofar as one lives and acts in union with the Risen Lord who desires to

live and act in and through us. If one's efforts at ministry bear fruit, it is ultimately because it is Christ through his Holy Spirit who lives, works, loves, prays and suffers in him.³³

To minister effectively, the educator must therefore enter into Christ's purposes and intentions. That is to say, Christ's zeal to save and liberate all must fuel one's passion to educate and form the young. Even when secular subjects are taught, the question of how such knowledge and skills might serve God's saving plan should never be far from the educator's mind. While explicit education in faith should always have primacy in the Christian school, all who educate, whatever subject they may teach, contribute to the work of God by their efforts to insure the integral wellbeing and development of the young, particularly in the area of character formation.

Since the spirit and virtues of Christ grow stronger as they are exercised in service, then indeed there can be no separation between one's efforts at personal sanctification and one's work to sanctify others. In seeking to serve others in union with Christ, teachers cooperate with grace, deepen the life of Christ within themselves, and are thus made holy. Thus, the prayer, "Live, Jesus in our hearts!" evinces a deep Christocentric spirituality: teachers are called not only to instruct the young in the mysteries and duties of the Christian faith but to extend the mystery of the Incarnation in the world, to become through the grace of the Holy Spirit *alter Christus* as they carry out their duties towards their pupils.

It is evident that educational ministry cannot simply be equated with classroom instruction. Ministry to young people involves more: it requires engaging the young in a fraternal relationship that becomes a sacrament of Christ's love for each one. Christ is the silent "third" in the relationship between teacher and student: it is the duty of the teacher as "ambassador and representative of Christ" to introduce young people to Christ so that Christ may be known, loved and followed. Introducing the young to Christ, however, is not merely a matter of speaking of Christ, necessary as that is. The best way to introduce Christ to a young person is by entering into Christ's love for that person and demonstrating that love in appropriate forms of care. Creative teaching, affirmation, concern for curbing vices and encouraging virtues, corrections that are just and prudent, the recognition and confirmation of another's gifts, compassionate listening, the sharing of faith or wisdom in ways respectful of individual freedom – these are ways in which educators even today make Christ's love tangible in the lives of young people. The good news of God's love in Christ is never more credible to the young than when it is embodied in the words and actions of those who instruct and accompany them.

4. Abandoning Ourselves to the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit and the Interior Life

The Holy Spirit occupies such a prominent place in De La Salle's writings that it has been called the integrating principle of De La Salle's spirituality.³⁴ This is principally because the spirit of faith which is the foundation and principle of the spiritual life is a fruit of the Holy Spirit's action in the believer. There is no spiritual life without the action of the Holy Spirit establishing God's reign in us,³⁵ enlightening us³⁶ and leading us to live and act through the power of grace.³⁷ The Holy Spirit as Sanctifier is the agent primarily responsible for awakening and vitalizing the spirit and virtues of Christ in us, transforming us in the divine likeness and enabling us to act as God's

co-workers and ministers of grace. De La Salle goes so far as to suggest that all human efforts to accomplish the work of God have little value or lasting effect unless they issue from a free and total submission to the wisdom and power of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit and Prophetic Ministry

Education involves forming learners to take responsibility for their lives and equipping them with the knowledge and skills necessary to achieve the fullness of their humanity in solidarity with their brothers and sisters in the human family. What Christianity adds to education in terms of knowledge is a vision grounded in God's revelation in Christ, of what it means to be "fully human and fully alive." In Christ, God's design for human beings is fully realized. When the Founder speaks of raising young people in the Christian spirit, he has in mind the task of liberating them from poverty, sin and ignorance and enabling them to live Christ-like lives. Integral to the work of Christian educators, then, is the task of communicating the gospel message in a way that enables those being formed to pass through the written word into a personal encounter with Christ the Living Word whose Spirit works through the words of the inspired texts to touch and transform minds and hearts. This is a prophetic task.

The Word of God is the divine wisdom challenging conventional "worldly" assumptions about what is of ultimate value and importance. In cultures where the desire for power, prestige, pleasure and possessions tends to colonize human hearts, the Word of God shocks and disrupts by revealing the vanity and emptiness of lives built on such foundations. Where the "spirit of the world" (one might say today, the ego or false self) exalts human autonomy and individual self-fulfillment, the Word of God upholds loving surrender to God's will as the way to happiness and peace; in a world where people store up earthly treasures to insure their personal security and wellbeing, the gospel challenges believers to relieve the world's pain by giving of their substance while trusting in God to provide for their needs. The contrast between the "spirit of the world" and the Christian spirit can be stark. The divine wisdom revealed in scripture is often so contrary to the mindset of contemporary culture that reason unaided by grace is unable to grasp its logic. Thus De La Salle instructs his disciples to open themselves to the Divine Author of sacred scripture, the same Spirit that inspired the prophets and apostles, that they may be enlightened according to the wisdom of God and come to possess the mind and heart of Christ. He further tells them to beg the Spirit to infuse their instruction and guidance with the power to "touch hearts" and bear fruit in miracles of conversion in the lives of those who are lost and alienated from God.

Abandonment to Divine Providence

Jean-Guy Rodrigue, FSC, in an extensive article on spirituality in 17th-century France draws attention to De La Salle's teaching on the Holy Spirit and divine providence:

By attending to the presence and action of God in his life, the Brother becomes aware of the fidelity of the One who chose him to do his work. Total abandonment to the guidance of the Spirit of God becomes for him, then, the surest way to realize the plan that God has for him. . . De La Salle himself lived this trust in and submission to God so thoroughly

that it could be said that “he is still one of the best representatives of the spiritual movement of self-abandonment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.”³⁸

For De La Salle, the Holy Spirit is not only the Sanctifier and Enlightener; the Holy Spirit is also the principal agent of the Triune God in history, working through people and events to realize the final reconciliation of all things in Christ.³⁹ It is the Holy Spirit that brings creation into being, raises up prophets of God, initiates the work of redemption in Christ, gives birth to the Church, and moves creation to its final consummation. It is this same Spirit that kindles a fire in the hearts of those chosen by God to minister to young people, associates them in community, gifts them with charisms, and leads them “from commitment to commitment” in order to realize God’s hidden designs.⁴⁰ Speaking through situations of “human and spiritual distress,” the Spirit moves and inspires Christian educators to create schools that will be for the young “signs of God’s Kingdom and instruments of salvation.”⁴¹

If the Holy Spirit is the principal agent of God’s saving plan acting through concrete events and circumstances, then *attention to the Spirit in daily life* and *abandonment to the Spirit’s providence* are the core practices of Lasallian spirituality. Thus the Founder, addressing his disciples, writes:

It is in the interior of the soul that this Spirit communicates himself to the soul and makes known what God asks in order to belong entirely to him. . . .⁴²

Do you abandon yourself entirely to this divine Spirit, so that he may ask of God all you need to have for the good of your own soul and for those in your care, and that you act only by him?⁴³

Spiritual abandonment involves actively embracing whatever the Spirit requires here and now for the realization of God’s purposes and plans. It is, as one commentator states, the purest manifestation of the spirit of faith.⁴⁴ Such an attitude is profoundly biblical. It is exemplified by Abraham and Job in the Old Testament and Mary and Jesus in the New Testament. It is not generally an attitude that one enters into with equanimity, for embracing God’s will inevitably brings a person into conflict with the deep attachments and aversions of his or her controlling ego. Embracing God’s will in the present often means letting go of personal preferences, projects and plans in order to serve a greater or more urgent need. It might mean entering into situations where one feels powerless, or having to accept assignments one would rather avoid. It might mean working harder to reach students for whom one has developed an antipathy, or accepting infirmity and retirement gracefully. The willingness to embrace the will of God – even when one fails to comprehend it – is made possible by an attitude of profound trust in God’s fidelity, a trust that can affirm in the midst of uncertainty that “all things work to the good for those who love God.”⁴⁵ Thus, Job in his extremity is still able to proclaim, “Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him; I will surely defend my ways to his face,”⁴⁶ and Jesus in Gethsemane prays: “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet *not my will, but yours be done.*”⁴⁷ *Thy will be done.* These four words sum up the core of all of biblical spirituality.

God’s will is nothing vague or abstract. It ordinarily comes in the form of some predetermined duty, some demand of charity, or some unavoidable cross that needs to be shouldered and borne.

Such duties and exigencies do not fall from the sky – they arise from the particular web of circumstances in which one finds oneself. Thus, accepting fully the present reality as it is – and not wishing it to be otherwise – is an important aspect of this spiritual attitude. To accept the present reality as it is means to recognize that this is where God is and this is where God wants me to be. God’s call is built into the possibilities and restrictions inherent in this particular time and place; and thus, to refuse to embrace the present moment, even when it appears difficult or unpleasant, is to flee God’s call. Abandonment means saying yes to the givens of the present moment – for it is here and now that God calls me to serve, to do what only I can do in response to the needs that confront me.

While the disposition of abandonment usually requires little more than acceding to the demands of simple justice and charity in a spirit of faith, there are other instances when it may involve a more elaborate discernment, especially when God’s will seems unclear (as for example, in the undertaking of new apostolic initiatives or the abandoning of older ones). Without neglecting the pragmatic assessment required for a good decision, discernment is more judiciously exercised if preceded by a personal history of attention to God’s presence in daily life, to the exercise of charity, and frequent recourse to sacred scripture, the sacraments and prayer – all disciplines which sensitize one to the leading of the Spirit. The call of the Spirit is not always in tune with what appears beneficial from the perspective of a worldly pragmatism, and even when pragmatism and the call of the Spirit do coincide, the interior motive on the part of those making the final decision ought to be loving obedience to God’s will.

Clearly then, abandonment to providence is not mere passivity, a “leave it to God” attitude; it is rather the progression from a tenacious willfulness rooted in the demands of the controlling ego to a free and equable willingness to let God lead one from commitment to commitment without being overly attached to personal interests and tangible results. Abandonment to God’s will often entails inconveniences and even risks to one’s person, possessions and prestige (as De La Salle’s life amply demonstrates); but one accedes to all this in faith trusting that the God who calls will be faithful in providing the means to realize what he intends, even when circumstances seem unpromising. Christian hope is not founded, after all, on the assurance of achieving desired outcomes but on trust in the God’s fidelity. “The more you abandon yourselves to God for what concerns your temporal needs,” De La Salle assures his disciples, “the more care He will take to provide for you.”⁴⁸

Such abandonment, which De La Salle likens to putting out to high seas with neither sail nor oars, is the most profound expression of faith and freedom in the Christian life.⁴⁹ Paradoxically, one is never more free than when one foregoes one’s will to embrace the will of God, never more secure than when one foregoes worldly security and trusts in God’s Spirit. In the continuing effort to let go of personal interests and security in order to pursue God’s will, the paschal mystery is reenacted again and again. Thus do the duties of one’s employment become effective means for personal sanctification.

5. Brothers of Christ, Brothers to One Another, Brothers to Those We Teach

In this section, Brotherhood is to be regarded as a kind of analogue and precursor of the various expressions of Lasallian ministerial community that exist today. The author thus invites readers

to apply the insights garnered from De La Salle's experience and teaching to their situation without feeling in any way that these teachings are reserved to consecrated religious.

From Master to Brother

In searching for a name to designate the members of their new society, De La Salle's companions chose to call themselves "Brothers" in order to capture the nature of the evangelical relationship they were living with one another and with the young people in their care. In an era when teachers were addressed as "masters," the title "Brother" immediately signaled a shift away from the stereotypical figure of a despot ruling the classroom by fear and threats of punishment to that of an elder brother whose kindness and care for his younger siblings wins their trust, respect and devotion.⁵⁰ For the Brothers, love, not fear, was to be the basis of the teacher's authority. In this way, De La Salle's companions saw themselves as expressing in their relationships with their pupils something of the profound and unmerited love with which God had touched and won their own hearts. The Brothers' availability to young people in all kinds of distress and their zeal for their pupils' salvation (to the point of giving up their lives if necessary!) would eventually be to these young people a sign and instrument of divine providence, a sacrament of God's unwavering fidelity and saving love.⁵¹

Brothers to One Another

The title "Brother" was also intended to name the relationship the teachers ought to have with one another. De La Salle understood that the work of establishing and maintaining Christian schools steeped in the gospel spirit was not an individual task; it required the concerted action of a community of educators possessing a certain degree of spiritual maturity and sharing the same vision, spirit, convictions, practices.⁵² Together in community, members would strive to live in solidarity as brothers to one another, mutually serving one another, bearing each other's burdens, encouraging each other's growth in holiness, supporting one another in the ministry and accompanying one another on the journey towards the Kingdom.⁵³

De La Salle, for all his lofty ideals regarding community living, always remained grounded in reality. In his trenchant commentary on Paul's admonition to "bear one another's burdens,"⁵⁴ he warns his followers that

. . . it is not possible for two people to live together without causing suffering to one another in some way or another; because we make one another suffer, it is only right that we should suffer from them in turn. This is a burden that God has imposed on all people, which helps them to be saved . . . Do not be so foolish, then, so unreasonable, and so unchristian as to expect to have nothing to suffer from your Brothers; for this would really be to ask for a most extraordinary and unheard-of miracle. Do not expect it, then, to happen in your lifetime.⁵⁵

Here we touch once more on the spirit of the paschal mystery: fraternal charity in community involves a dying to self to live for God and the service of others.

Such brotherhood cannot, however, be the product of human effort alone. Mere flesh and blood is incapable of overcoming the deep-seated tendencies to egoism which ensnare the human heart and sabotage genuine unity. This is all the more the case when dealing with persons of varying temperaments, backgrounds, and dispositions. “If grace does not come to the rescue,” the Founder warns, “it is almost impossible that they live in harmony with one another and that charity not suffer severely.”⁵⁶ The unity of the Brothers is first of all a gift, the fruit of the reconciling power of the Holy Spirit who progressively recreates in them the self-giving love that is the life of the Trinity. It is in the daily assent to the power of the Spirit at work in one’s life and in the life of the community that a truly gospel-inspired brotherhood comes to be established.

Union with Christ in the Spirit as the Ground of Brotherhood

The consecration to the Most Holy Trinity which is pronounced by the Brothers during their vows points to the transcendent origins of this brotherhood and its work.⁵⁷ It is not mere altruism nor natural affection that draws these teachers together; it is the call of the Risen Lord who sends the Holy Spirit to associate them together in a community that will continue his mission and incarnate him in the world of poor and abandoned youth.⁵⁸ The ties that bind these men together then are not based on blood or natural affection but on a common zeal for mission and the evangelical charity which flows from communion with Christ in the Holy Spirit.⁵⁹ Recognizing this, De La Salle tells his disciples to “implore the Lord of all hearts to make your hearts one in the heart of Jesus.”⁶⁰ This mystical union with Christ produces the fraternal charity which is the lifeblood of both communal living and gospel ministry. Such charity is a graced participation in the very life of God who is Love. It is marked by unconditional self-giving, the acceptance of others in their giftedness and frailty, the capacity to bear one another’s burdens, and zeal for mission. Faith animated by charity is the essence of the Christian life and the foundation of this mystical union.⁶¹ This is why De La Salle stresses that those who lack the spirit of faith are deprived of the grace of their state and should consider themselves dead members.⁶² To lose the spirit particular to the brotherhood is to be cut off from Christ to whom the Brothers are united in the life of grace as branches on the vine.

Brotherhood in Service to Universal Reconciliation: A Future Direction for Reflection?

At this point, this author wishes to take up a line of reflection that De La Salle himself does not pursue but which seems to flow from a consideration of the mystical-Trinitarian roots of consecrated brotherhood. What follows is speculative, but seems to this author to hold promise for a consideration of what consecrated brotherhood, and by extension, authentic Christian community might mean today.

To this author’s way of thinking, the witness of evangelical brotherhood is a great gift to the Church and to the world because it suggests a way of being together that countervails the rivalry, exclusion, victimization and violence that have lain at the foundation of every civilization from ancient times to the present.⁶³ Since the dawn of history, humankind has assumed that fulfillment lies in acquiring possessions, power, and prestige in order to be over and above others. Such a mode of existence which privileges “having” and “taking” over “being” and “self-giving” constitutes humans as rivals in a never-ending competition for limited resources. This rivalistic mode of being together is inherently prone to violence; history is replete with the bones of

countless victims of humanity's acquisitive desire. Within this framework, peace is merely the temporary cessation of hostilities or else, the suppression of violence by superior power.

Through Jesus, God reveals an alternative form of being-together, one that privileges charity, humility, compassion, selflessness and forgiveness as the way to true peace. The key to peace for Jesus is the transformation of desire which takes place when we encounter and are transformed by the love of God which is purely gratuitous, unmerited, faithful, all-inclusive, and inexhaustible. The God embodied in Jesus, who empties himself out of love for sinful men and women, rejects no one; there is no violence in God. The natural response to those who encounter divine self-giving is to imitate and share it. Brotherhood rooted in communion with Christ through the Spirit models this alternative way of being and mediates the reconciling presence of Christ to the world.

It seems to this author that this direction of reflection, while a material departure from De La Salle's thinking, is not inconsistent with it and is, for Lasallians, made necessary by what we continue to see in the world – the unrelieved exploitation of the poor by the rich, wars waged in the name of peace, and the vicious spirit of rivalry between nations that is bound to arise as the earth's resources dwindle. The poet W. H. Auden once wrote, "We must love another or die."⁶⁴ Never have those words rung truer or more urgently. But such a challenge requires a new understanding of what it means to be human, a continuing effort to lay bare the tangled desires at the roots of violence, and initiation into an alternative form of social existence rooted in intimacy with the non-violent God of Jesus Christ. Brotherhood and communion lived in memory of Jesus is a prophetic witness to the possibility of true peace.

While this particular line of reflection ends here, the author hopes it might provide seeds for future efforts to articulate an understanding of Lasallian spirituality relevant for today.

Conclusion

This essay has been an attempt to flesh out a few of the principal themes that constitute De La Salle's way of integrating the quest for holiness with one's work as a teacher. In sum:

- God's saving plan forms the faith-horizon within which educators are invited to regard their work. Seen in this perspective, the educator is a minister and co-worker with God in the salvation of the young.
- Participation in the work of God requires the spirit of faith, which De La Salle regards as the principle and foundation of the spiritual life. This spirit is cultivated through study and reflection on the Word of God, the practice of the presence of God, interior prayer, recollection, prudent asceticism, and the performance of one's actions for God from motives of faith and charity.
- Lasallian ministry is union with Christ in his interior life and participation in his loving service to human need. By entering through prayer into Christ's attitudes and dispositions and then seeking to live them out, the person is gradually transformed by grace so that he or she becomes a living sacrament of Christ to others.

- Union with Christ is lived out in an evangelical brotherhood that consists in loving fidelity to one's associates in the ministry and in loving fidelity to those one is called to teach. This union, rooted in Trinitarian love, has a paschal dimension and anticipates the reconciliation of all things in Christ.
- The Holy Spirit is the active agent of God's plan. Fidelity to God's purposes in the world requires a continual abandonment to the Spirit's action and guidance as it is mediated in the events of everyday life – in the duties set before one, in the needs of young people and in the demands of charity and justice. Abandonment to the Spirit, which is the fullest expression of the spirit of faith, involves a continual dying to individual willfulness in order to live for God alone. Thus, it partakes of the paschal mystery and leads to personal sanctification.

This essay suggests that the preceding description constitutes the underlying form or “gestalt” of Lasallian spirituality. It is a “way,” a spiritual path which this author believes has continuing relevance for those who seek to make of their work as teachers a path to holiness. It is this author's hope that armed with this “map,” more educators may be emboldened to regard their work thusly and to follow the call of the Spirit as it leads them to incarnate Christ in the world of education. And so, in union with De La Salle, we pray:

Come Holy Spirit, take possession of our hearts and so guide our actions that we may be able to say that they are the work of your hands rather than ours and that our whole being in each of its functions is entirely dependent on your good pleasure. Blessed are they who live and act only by the Spirit of God for it is no longer they who live but Jesus Christ through his Holy Spirit, who lives in them.⁶⁵

Notes

1. Thomas D. McGonigle, OP, “Ministerial Spirituality” in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1993), p. 659.

2. The key Pauline texts that De La Salle draws on are Ephesians 1:3-10, Colossians 1:25-27, and 1 Corinthians 4:1.

3. *Meditations* by John Baptist de La Salle #193.3 (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1994).

4. The first two meditations of De La Salle's *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* (M 192-193) offer a panoramic view of God's plan of salvation and the role of the Christian educator in it.

5. *Meditation* #160.3.

6. *Meditation* #194.1.

7. *Meditations* #194.2,3; #196.2,3; #197.2; #198.3; and #202.2.

8. *Meditation* #160.3.
9. *Meditations* #33; and #196.1.
10. “Rules I Have Imposed on Myself” #3 in *Rule and Foundational Documents* by John Baptist de La Salle (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 2002), p. 199.
11. *Meditation* #205.2.
12. William Shannon, *Silence on Fire* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), pp. 30-32.
13. *Collection of Various Short Treatises* by John Baptist de La Salle (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications), p. 67.
14. *Collection of Various Short Treatises*, pp. 30-31.
15. See the valuable discussion on the effects of the spirit of faith in Robert Laube, *Pentecostal Spirituality: The Lasallian Theology of Apostolic Life*, (New York: Desclee, 1970), pp. 25-49.
16. Luke 22:42.
17. *Collection of Various Short Treatises*, p. 32.
18. *Meditation* #44.3.
19. *Collection of Various Short Treatises*, pp. 35-36; *Meditations* #22.1; #62.3; #67; and #70.
20. *Collection of Various Short Treatises*, pp. 35-38.
21. *Collection of Various Short Treatises*, pp. 36-38.
22. See Joseph Schmidt, FSC, “Simple Attention (Contemplation)” in *Lasallian Themes 2* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1995), pp. 222-24.
23. *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer* by John Baptist de La Salle (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications), p. 51.
24. Following a deep mystical experience, St. Catherine of Genoa is reported to have run through the streets of her hometown crying out, “My deepest me is God!”
25. The “French School of Spirituality” refers to a group of spiritual writers and reformers associated with the thought and insights of Pierre Cardinal de Bérulle. These include Charles de Condren, Jean-Jacques Olier, St. John Eudes, St. John Baptist de La Salle, St. Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort, etc. For an overview of this tradition, see Lowell M. Glendon, SS,

“The French School of Spirituality” in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press), pp. 420-423.

26. By the standards of his own day, however, De La Salle’s theological position on human nature would have been regarded as fairly balanced. One need only contrast his view of the infant as “a mass of flesh” in whom intelligence arises over time (Meditation #197.1) with that of Cardinal Pierre de Bérulle who dismisses the human being as “the most vile and useless creature of all, indeed, as dust, mud, and a mass of corruption” to see the difference in outlook.

27. See Joseph A. Grassi, *The Secret of Paul the Apostle* (New York: Orbis, 1978), pp. 23-35 for a full discussion of “identity with Christ” in Paul’s writings.

28. Antonio Botana, FSC, “Imitation of Christ” in *Lasallian Themes 3* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1997), pp. 150-51. Botana points out that De La Salle, having been a seminarian at St. Sulpice, would have been familiar with this text from the founder of the seminary Jean-Jacques Olier, a leading light in the French school of spirituality: “The first and last aim of this Institute should be to live totally for God in Jesus Christ Our Lord, in such a way that the inner being of his Son may enter the very depth of our heart, and that each one may say what St. Paul said so confidently about himself: ‘I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ.’ For all of us here, this should be the only expectation and the only thought. All activity should be directed towards living interiorly the life of Christ and manifesting it by the actions of our mortal bodies.”

29. Miguel Campos, FSC, and Michel Sauvage, FSC, *Announcing the Gospel to the Poor*, translated by Matthew J. O’Connell (Romeoville, IL: Christian Brothers National Office, 1981), pp. 113-114.

30. Galatians 2:20.

31. This teaching is characteristic of the French School: “A Christian adheres to Christ by seeking consciously to conform one’s whole life to the interior life of Jesus, to what Bérulle called the ‘states’ of the Incarnate Word. For Bérulle, each event in the historical life of the Incarnate Word involves an action that is finished and will not be repeated, and also a ‘state’ which manifests the feelings and inward dispositions of Christ. Speaking of these mysteries of Christ, Bérulle writes, ‘They are past in their execution but they are present in their virtue: and neither will this virtue ever pass nor the love with which they were fulfilled. Therefore the spirit, the state, the virtue, the merit of the mystery remain present always.’ Thus one can be united with Christ in a profound way by sharing in these eternal states.” See Charles J. Healy, SJ, *Christian Spirituality: An Introduction to the Heritage* (NY: Alba House, 1999), pp. 289-290.

32. The whole second part of the method of interior prayer is devoted to this. See *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*, pp. 83-148. Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life in the sense that his virtues constitute our “way” to holiness, his maxims the “truth” we are called to live, and his mysteries or saving deeds the “life” we are called to reproduce.

33. *Meditations* #195 and #196.1.

34. Jean Pungier, FSC, *Ministers of Grace*, (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1983), p. 14.

35. *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*, pp. 35-37.

36. *Meditation #44*.

37. *Meditations #45 and #62.3*.

38. Jean-Guy Rodrigue, FSC, "Religious Life in France," translated by Augustine Loes, FSC, in *Spirituality in the Time of John Baptist de La Salle*, edited by Robert C. Berger, FSC (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1999), p. 73.

39. Jean Pungier, FSC, *Ministers of Grace*, (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1983), pp. 28-29.

40. On the centrality of the Holy Spirit in the faith-journey of De La Salle, see Michel Sauvage, FSC, "The Gospel Journey of John Baptist de La Salle," in *Spirituality in the Time of John Baptist de La Salle*, edited by Robert C. Berger, FSC (Landover, Maryland: Christian Brothers Conference, 1999), pp. 245-246.

41. *Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1987).

42. *Meditation #62.3*.

43. *Meditation #62.2*.

44. Saturnino Gallego, FSC, *An Introduction to the Writings of John Baptist de La Salle*, translated by Arthur Bertling, FSC, and edited by William Mann, FSC (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1993), p. 23.

45. Romans 8:28.

46. Job 13:5.

47. Luke 22:42.

48. *Meditation #67.3*.

49. *Meditation #134.1*.

50. Henri Bédel, FSC, *The Origins 1651-1726* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1996), pp. 64-65.

51. Campos and Sauvage, *Announcing the Gospel to the Poor*, p. 107.

52. *Meditation #39.3*.

53. *Meditations* #65, #73.2, and #74; *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*, pp. 28-29.

54. Galatians 6:2.

55. *Meditation* #73.2.

56. *Meditation* #74.1.

57. The vow formula of the Brothers begins with an invocation to the Trinity: “Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, with profound respect before your infinite glory, I consecrate myself entirely to you to procure your glory as far as I am able and as you will require of me . . .”

58. *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*, pp. 28-29.

59. *Meditations* #65, #73.2, and #74.

60. *Meditation* #39.3.

61. *The Duties of a Christian to God* by John Baptist de La Salle, translated by Richard Arnandez, FSC, and edited by Alexis James Doval (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 2002), pp. 21-22.

62. See the preface to the second chapter of the *Rule of 1718 in Rule and Foundational Documents*, translated and edited by Augustine Loes, FSC, and Ronald Isetti (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 2002), p. 16.

63. Those interested in this line of reflection might do well to consider the works of Rene Girard, especially *Violence and the Sacred* (1977), *Things Hidden from the Foundation of the World* (1987), and *I Saw Satan Fall from Heaven* (2001). Rene Girard’s thoughts and their relevance for today are also laid out in Gil Bailie’s *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: Crossroad, 1995).

64. “September 1, 1939.”

65. This is a revised version of De La Salle’s own prayer as found in *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*, p. 38.