

## **Fidelity to the Movement of the Spirit: Criteria for Discernment<sup>i</sup>**

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### **Introduction**

Do you make use of this light to judge all visible things, and to learn what is true and false about them, what is only apparent and what is substantial? If you act as a disciple of Jesus Christ enlightened by God's Spirit, this is the only light that should guide you.<sup>1</sup>

One of the greatest obstacles we come up against when reflecting on what we understand by discernment in the Lasallian family resides in the way in which we have ordinarily been introduced to the topic. As a fact, many of us, both Brothers and lay people, have been initiated into the life of the Church and a style of spirituality that has placed "a strong emphasis" on the practice of the virtues, and negatively, on a struggle against all that is contrary to that practice. Besides, to this ethical and ascetical emphasis, we must add another. That would be the quest for Christian perfection, often sustained by a theology of the religious life that places the accent on perfection, not necessarily on charity, as an ideal, but one not truly evangelical. These strongly individualistic emphases of "exclusivist" spirituality often lent themselves to a feeling of superiority, as much on the part of religious with regard to the laity, as by Christians in general with regard to other religions and with non-believers.

For Lasallians, these "accents" found their justification in the interpretation made of the foundational itinerary and the writings of the Founder. In truth, with these we were confirmed in our convictions about the ascetical spirituality that put all the stress on the practice of virtues, especially at the end of the eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth. Thus, for example, the beatification and canonization of the Founder lent themselves to the publication in 1900 of a book called *Spiritual Doctrine* which attributed to him every virtue, from A (abandonment) to Z (zeal), backed up by examples from the life of the Founder and corroborated by his writings.

However, we might ask, is that the best interpretation of the itinerary our beginnings had? How do those exclusivist and excessively ascetical accents match up with the accents of the mystical and ministerial thrust of the French School of Spirituality in which de La Salle was formed? Might there be another way to understand those spiritual emphases in the discernment of his life and his writings?

With these questions we are going to approach today the topic from another perspective. Recognizing, of course, what is of worth in those traditionally accepted emphases; we are also going to criticize their limitations. At the same time we will try to grasp the new accents which will permit a new understanding and a more authentic and Gospel based praxis.

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## **Central to this whole topic: Vital stirrings and decisions made.**

In dealing with this topic, it is important that we not forget its anthropological basis. We begin then speaking of our desires and impulses, of those things about which we are passionate. Passion here is like a vital impulse. And, for any adult, whether Brother or lay person, what he is passionate about is not just affairs of his personal life. His relationships in community, or in his family life, the matters that pertain to his profession, his colleagues and students, his relationships in social and political settings, all these can be passionately held. He may become passionate about his work, his professional life, his successes and accomplishments. All that contributes to the creation of a better, fairer and more just world can inspire him with passion.

Of course, when we speak of passion, we must also include the other side of the coin, its negative side. This is the passion that we suffer in loneliness, in our broken relationships, in our failures at work, our very existence in a violent and unjust world. One very dramatic aspect of our passions and empathies is undoubtedly the suffering that we vicariously feel in others, in the most fragile and needy, the abandoned and the marginalized. These empathies, lived in others, directly impinge on our own most personal passions and affect.

As a fact, in not a few occasions provoked by these situations, we might intensely experience “a clash” between our desires and impulses, between passions and their dark side. This might perhaps occur in those moments in which we experience the need to discern our desires and impulses, our passions and their negative effects. We can call these “passivities.”

There surely are life’s great moments, major “crossroads” at which our contradictory impulses clash. But the need to discern also arises in the most ordinary situations, in the normal fabric of daily life, in those things at the heart of our existence. In these we discern between what is “false” and what is “true,” the “ephemeral and the real.” As De La Salle asks, what does discerning “all things visible” have to do with our desires?

And what does God have to do with all of this? Are our plans and wishes necessarily and always in conformity with God’s plan? Do we find the imprint of the God of surprises, the Father of Jesus, in our own desires and passions which so often leave us disconcerted and unprepared?

## **What do these desires have to do with “the faith”?**

From this anthropological basis of our impulses and desires, we regard all things and we open ourselves to the mystery of life. And of death. As it happens, we go through life progressively opening ourselves to a sequence of little deaths, of a thousand starts and restarts, in which an ever new and widening horizon is opening up. This horizon comes towards us; it dawns upon us as a gift. Whatever we may be going through in our personal lives, our changing human relationships, and our fragile world that appear to push us toward total annihilation, we do know that at the very depth of our heart that we are not irredeemably condemned to disappear, to live a meaningless life. We seek to give a reason for our faith, in the midst of the senselessness of the destructive forces of death from which, paradoxically, new meanings spring forth. “Behold, I will make all things new.”

This fundamental structure of life is what we can recognize in what we describe as exodus and paschal events. This “exodus and paschal” structure thrusts us forward, breaks molds and opens up our desires and impulses, our passion and negativity to our final horizon.

How then does our faith function in the midst of all these “things visible?” We live reality in a given space and time. Our desires and passions are controlling our lives in great measure. When that reality starts to lose its secure foundation, new meaning in a new situation does not emerge immediately; rather, what does emerge is a difficult period between two spaces and two times. It is precisely there, in that critical place and in that interlude of time where our desires and impulses clash, that the tension that urges us forward to seek a new meaning arises, the quest for “a something new.”

The loss of our moorings that we experience is not necessarily destructive. It can be the place from which we shove off anew and “move on,” that is, make “the passage” toward a new space and time. The experience demands a great fidelity to oneself, to relationships, to the things that are disappearing and dying, and at the same time a great openness to mystery.

However, this sequence of small deaths and new lives does not function automatically. These crossroads can also render us paralyzed. We might freeze in terror. While fixating on a world of known quantities and accepted meanings, instead of opening ourselves to move forward toward a land that we scarcely perceive and peoples as yet unknown, can shake us. How are fidelity to oneself and fidelity to God linked? Do these fidelities always coincide or are they opposed to each other?

### **Can we imagine a Lasallian style of discernment properly speaking?**

Finally, and taking into account this anthropological and theological basis, we ask ourselves if there is a characteristic style, or particular accents, to discernment in our Lasallian family. What importance did discernment have in the life and the writings of De La Salle? What does he propose in his writings?

The term “discernment” is used relatively little in De La Salle’s writings (11 times). The verb, “to discern” is employed more often (22 times), oftentimes in the current sense given to the term in the French of the eighteenth century: “to separate,” “to distinguish.” This vocabulary, as a consequence, by itself would not articulate a more coherent experience with a mystical/prophetic vision as we find, for example, in other more frequent themes in De La Salle’s vocabulary: to totally abandon oneself to God, to fully identify oneself with Christ and to recognize and respond to the movements and inspirations of the Spirit.

In that sense, we would run the risk of watering down our reflection if we were to limit ourselves in our analysis of the sequences of small deaths and new meanings that pop up along life’s journey with a vocabulary that is so narrow and restricted. For that reason, so as to encounter the full scope of those terms, we must set our sights on the entirety of the itinerary of the beginnings with the purpose of best understanding what the first community of Brothers associated with De La Salle lived and understood about discernment; and, based on that experience, to identify the criteria and the characteristics of the discernment proper to this family in the Church.

**A. “Narratives” of discernment in our foundational itinerary: Seeking to be faithful and responding to the inspirations and the movement of the Spirit.**

Before addressing the style of discernment that came about in the context of the foundational itinerary it will serve us well to consider an antecedent that will help us to distinguish the style of discernment of the young Canon with his family and with his spiritual director “before” and “after” his encounter with the first teachers.

It has to do with the attempts and the negotiations he made to trade his canonry for a pastoral ministry in a parish. It is interesting to note that in this instance there is no indication of a desire or an impulse, except perhaps an outside impulse, that of his spiritual director. No signs of passion for something or someone appear. Neither is there an awareness of the ills that the poor suffer. Nor was there any instability in the place and existential time in which the Canon moved among his family and in the Church. So there was no “passage,” no going out from or “moving toward.” So he did not make that decision. Or rather he did decide, but it was to stand where he was.

But what happened when, in his contact with Adrien Nyel and the first teachers, De La Salle became open to serving the poor through education in a world which he had scarcely known?

- 1. The first significant crossroads experience: the individual discernment** of a personal calling that brought about the birth of a community of Brothers for the schools (when De La Salle was in his thirties).

Let us begin our reflection on this first crossroads with a letter written by De La Salle, priest, canon of Rheims on June 20, 1682 in which we can detect a before and an after, an “exodus passage,” a departure for something ahead.

Gentlemen,

I would be very disinterested in what has to do with the glory of God, if I were to be so insensitive as not to be moved by the urgent pleas of your dean and by the courtesy with which he honors me by writing today.

I would be, gentlemen, very unjust if I would not send school masters from our community, seeing the effort and the ardor that you manifest to me for the instruction and the Christian education of your children.

I beg you, then, to be persuaded that there will be nothing that I will not so take to heart as to support your good intentions in this regard. Next Saturday I will send two masters, of whom I hope that your will be fully satisfied, in order to begin the following day on the feast of St. Peter. I remain highly grateful for all your attentions to me and I ask you to consider me, gentlemen, with all respect, your humble and very obedient servant in Our Lord.

*De La Salle, priest, canon of Rheims*

What most stands out in this letter is the personal commitment that De La Salle takes, seeing himself as the intermediary between the teachers and the persons who were requesting masters for the creation of a school. We are surprised to find in his mouth the reference to “our community.” And we ask ourselves to what point can it be stated that his significant relations have changed or that the masters are aware, and have the intention, of being part of a community? The fact is that some days later, the 24<sup>th</sup> of June, 1682, De La Salle left his own house where he lived with his brothers and sisters and where, besides, he had housed the first masters from the 24<sup>th</sup> of June of 1681, one year before, in order to live with them in another house. This letter is indicative, therefore, of a between time, of a before and an after, of a reality that was fading away and another that was taking shape, but which was not yet fully clear.

A “before,” then, in which he had not chosen to leave his social and family settings; the before in which new relations in his life had been imperceptibly coming to the fore, new interests and new passions; and also, a slow but growing awareness of the problems that others suffered: the artisans and the poor who saw themselves obliged to neglect their children, children abandoned and unschooled, and incompetent teachers with neither professional preparation nor evangelical motivation. The “passage” of one who, previously, had not contemplated the prospect of the schools sponsored by the friends of his deceased spiritual director, Nicolas Roland; the passage toward assuming the direction of the schools, as he affirmed in one of the fragments of the *Memoir of the Beginnings*.

In these between-times, the point of reference of his personal relationships has changed. From now on, the masters and the poor that they served appear to be the most meaningful and far beyond the inspiration that he had found with his spiritual director. De La Salle went on to consult Father Nicolas Barré, a man noted for his passion and commitment to causes of the Gospel. His center of interest was changing.

It is the between-times of discernment, on seeing the reality of the poor, on experiencing the needs of the masters. He would do this discernment through personal reflection, through retreats, in prayer and in consultation with a spiritual director, as the first biographers attest. It was discernment illuminated by the new biblical icons of which the *Memoir of the Beginnings* make mention. These were of a provident God who hears the cries of the poor, of a poor and helpless Messiah who has nowhere to lay his head, of being sent to proclaim the Good News to the poor.

This was the discernment in which two impulses and desires clashed as they pulled him in different directions and contradictory obligations, such as appear in a revealing text, probably another fragment from the above mentioned *Memoir of the Beginnings*, about the reasons he had to renounce his canonry:

I find that I must remain silent and that I have no right to speak of perfection through poverty if I myself am not poor, nor about abandonment in the hands of providence, if I have resources against misery or about complete confidence in God, if I possess an income sufficient to remove all worry for the future.<sup>2</sup>

He would have to discern the impact of the consequences that would follow upon his own indecision, the departures of the masters, the failure of the schools, the difficulty of re-starting the project.

It was a discernment that had at its core and ultimate purpose the quest for “the glory of God” and “the good of the Church.” But at the same time his discernment was based on the reality of the poor and the masters with whom he was living. From that basis arose a certain urgency on which he had to discern and take a decision that could not be delayed:

The same voice that called me to the canonry, now urged me to another place. I carry that response at the inmost part of my conscience and I listen when I consult it. Doesn't it show me with sufficient clarity that there is another state that deserves the preference and which draws me along by the hand?<sup>3</sup>

The criteria are clearly historical then: centered in the God of the poor, attentive to the poor and his masters, in order to build up the Church. The new obligations that he identified and embraced were not understood as mere practices of virtues, but as an exigency that placed him in the world as one called, given the vocation by God to contribute to His work. The decision will demand of him a departure toward the future, for a new earth in order to find new men. He'll find a personal sense of his identity and a vocation totally renewed. It is a new purpose.

And with the decision, came “the afterwards.” It was the “after” period of a community of charity schools established in Rheims, all in his immediate surroundings, until he arrived in Paris, completely gratuitous and dependent on the good will of parish priest and civilian authorities. Without having foreseen all this from the beginning, De La Salle entered in and embraced with Jesus the poor man, a new reality that he had scarcely known. “Behold the God that makes all things new.”

God who conducts all things gently and with wisdom, and who does not force the hand of men, wishing to dedicate me entirely to the care of the schools, did so in a manner which was very imperceptible and over a long period of time, in such a way that one commitment led to another, without my having foreseen it at the beginning.<sup>4</sup>

## **2. The second crossroads experience: the community discernment of a group associated and united for the mission (during De La Salle's forties).**

Some ten years later, now in Paris, the community was under threat and in danger of disappearing. New questions arose about its identity and its purpose and on the structures that would guarantee its continuity, stability and efficacy.

If, at the first crossroads, there seemed to be a more individual and personal tone (myself and them) as we found in the *Memoir of the Beginnings*, this new crossroads was more community based (we). And that would be the tone of the discernment. Let us analyze the document of the election of De La Salle as superior on June 7, 1694.

We, the subscribed members, Brother Nicolas Vuyart . . . (eleven more names follow), after having been associated with M. John Baptist de La Salle, in order to maintain together and by association, gratuitous schools by the vows that we pronounced yesterday, recognize that, as a consequence of our vows and the association that we have contracted through them, we have elected M. John Baptist de La Salle as superior, to whom we promise to obey with entire submission in virtue of our vow, as well as those whom he will appoint as superiors.

We likewise declare our intention in the present election that we have made of M. de La Salle as superior that there not be any other consequence, for it is our intention that after him, in the future and for always, that there not be among us, nor elected as superior, any priest, and there be no one who has received sacred orders and that we will have no one, nor will we admit as superior, anyone who is not associated with us and has vowed as we have and with all those who will be associated with us in the future.<sup>5</sup>

This election is the result of a long and complex process of discernment which, in a certain way, began with the commitment of three associates, the first to commit themselves in a formal way in 1691, Nicolas Vuyart and Gabriel Drolin, together with De La Salle. It culminated in 1694 with the commitment of the twelve associates. It can be said that this little initial group was the seed of the first form of association. And that the document of the election reveals the first and foundational awareness on the part of those associates that they identified with one another in order to take part together in a common work.

What, then, were the criteria for that discernment? Surely it would have included the concerns and perplexity they shared as they recalled their historical reality; also, the emergency situation and the danger of seeing the work that they had built up for so many years disappear. The children and youngsters would be deprived of this educational service. The *Memoir on the Habit*, written at this time, is characterized by the clarity that this community of Christian Schools had about its identity, and that of its members, the distinct components of the community and its signs of belonging and its purpose. This *Memoir* was already a first attempt at clarification. From now on, the persons with whom De La Salle discerned were no longer his spiritual directors or persons on the outside of the community. His associates would henceforth be the ones who would make the decisions with regard to the life and the work to which they had been called, maintaining together and by association the gratuitous schools, as the formula of vows of 1694 attests.

The center and source from which their common history set out was the glory of the Trinitarian God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, to whom they consecrated themselves, in order to procure His glory. If the associates and the poor were the relational context of their discernment, God, present in history was its *raison d'être*. It was God who called them, convoked them and consecrated them.

The obligations that they had contracted by vow were specific and they defined the process or associative itinerary as well as the characteristics of identity of this association in the Church for the mission: association, obedience and stability. The obligations of vow were understood not as a pathway toward personal perfection but as “means to fulfill the mission.”

As a result, both the *Memoir on the Habit* and the vows, firstly, the vow of the three men discerning together all that would work for the good of the society of the Christian Schools in 1691, and then the vows of the twelve associates of 1694, are indicative of an on-going discernment of the community over a period of several years which found its optimum expression in the assembly and retreats from the Feast of the Ascension up to the Feast of the Trinity in 1694 and in the official record of the election.

This was a discernment that brought about not just deliberative and legislative assemblies but more profoundly a vision of faith in the God of the poor who acts in history, in answer to personal and community prayer. The special retreat of that assembly challenged them in the readings of the liturgy with certain fundamental biblical icons that shed light on the identity and finality of this new association in the Church. Among these, that of the apostolic community waiting together to receive the force of the Spirit, that is, that renewing and transforming force that would make them “pass through” from confusion to light, from weakness and fear to audacity and the power to work miracles.

It was a *before*, doubtless, for a fragile community threatened by forces from within and without. And it was an *after*, that of a conscious association of the consecration of those associates who maintained the gratuitous schools together.

Henceforth they would go forward as one, structuring their community life with a Rule and their work with the *Management of Christian Schools*. These two documents, for which the principal Brothers had contributed ideas and writings, were to establish the parameters of this journey of common association in order to answer to the needs of the families of the poor, of the children and youngsters of the most neglected elements of society.

**3. The final crossroads experience: a collective discernment** of the Society of the Brothers of the Christian Schools in the absence of their Founder (toward the end of De La Salle’s sixties).

At Easter time in 1714, in the context of a great crisis that overshadowed the future of the Society of the Christian Schools, the principal Brothers sent the following letter to De La Salle. It is surprising by the inversion of the personal pronouns. If at the first crossroads, De La Salle used the pronoun “I” and spoke of “them” or addressed them as “you”, in this letter the Brothers used the corporate “we” and they addressed their Founder as “you” (formal “vous” in French).

Monsieur, our very dear Father:

We, the principal Brothers of the Christian Schools, having in view the greater glory of God as well as the good of the Church and of our Society, consider that it is of the greatest importance that you return to the care and general direction of God’s holy work, which is also your own, because it has pleased the Lord to make use of you to establish it and to guide it for so many years.

We are all convinced that God himself has called you to this work and that he has given you the grace and talents necessary for the good government of this new Society so



beneficial to the Church. We acknowledge in all justice that you have always guided it with considerable success and edification.

That is why, Monsieur, we very humbly beseech you, and we command you in the name and on the part of the body of the Society to which you have vowed obedience, to take up at once the general government of the Society.

This letter, coming from the body of the Society and in the name of all, did not simply recall the vowed obligations, as the last paragraph pointed out. It was, besides, the product of the discernment of a community without its Founder. And these Brothers, associated as one, surely gave an answer to the personal doubts that must have been worrying De La Salle and served to bring a new focus to his own personal discernment. Affirming that they were convinced that De La Salle was the authentic superior, they not only straightened out what some were thinking, including certain persons in authority in the Church, but they corporately confirmed that he was the guarantor of the charism of that community in the Church with the gifts and the talents necessary for the establishment of this new Society, this new association. They did not recognize, then, the authority of others who were not associated to govern this new company in the Church.

In addition, over and above the light it shed for the personal discernment of de La Salle, the letter reveals the criteria of its community discernment: the “before,” that is, the happenings that had been chipping away at the unity and effectiveness of the association, the interferences of the ecclesiastical and civil authorities that had put them in danger of the dismemberment of the Society by splitting up the communities of the teachers, each one directed by a cleric. And, as a consequence, the danger of reducing the whole concept of the Christian and gratuitous schools which had been consolidated through the common “Management of the Schools” to a mere collection of charity schools, as they had been known and had outgrown for more than 25 years, each one independent of the local authorities that had sponsored them. It was indeed a serious crisis, a contradiction to the long history of a God who had called them and sent them to do together the Work of God, our work, his work. It was an abuse by the civil authority and that of the Church which would negate the new entity that De La Salle and the Brothers had created together.

The discernment of this letter was based on the story of the poor, on the glory of God, for the Work of God. The discernment took into account the good of the Church but not a vertical, hierarchical Church, rather, one for the persons who would benefit from our work. The discernment consequently took into account the common good of this Society, of this association founded and guided by De La Salle from a long time before.

The obligations of vows have their consistency within that discernment and therefore the Brothers could first beseech, and then command in the name of all the associates.

A “before,” the before of a body threatened by division, in danger both in its identity as in its finality, a body menaced in its charismatic and institutional identity; and an “afterwards,” that of a body determined to discern as one, to take responsibility for its own life. From this point on the assemblies and chapters would be a privileged place for discernment and decision making.

The vows that were renewed in 1719 and the definitive version of the Rules over which De La Salle had labored in his last years were to be the acts of a body of associates without their Founder.

The criteria of discernment of this family in the Church has been expanding and strengthening progressively: the God at work in history, the educational service for the good of the children of artisans and the poor, the good of the Church, the obligations assumed by the association for the mission.

#### **4. Daily crossroads experiences over the course of his life, the tension between personal and community discernments (during De La Salle's fifties and sixties).**

The criteria for discernment did not take shape only at those dramatic crossroads that we have been exploring above. If it is true that in them we can more dramatically detect the characteristics of a style of personal, community and corporative discernment, as was waxing stronger over nearly forty years, we cannot minimize the fact that that style of discernment firmed up from day to day, at the heart of the life and in the vital context of what was occurring in the daily grind. It is because in this day to day activity that we begin and begin anew, that we open ourselves to an ever widening horizon, and we embrace the new things that God is creating.

It is for this reason that we are attentive to the discipline of each day, to those personal and community practices that had fomented a climate of discernment in the community of our origins.

Evidently a more systematic study would shed more light on these. Given the importance that they had, we should probably begin with the role that the Common Rules and the Rules for the work had in the discernment of each day. But that would go far beyond the limits of these reflections. Here we must be content, simply as examples, with some reflections on three practices that marked the daily, monthly and yearly rhythm of the life: A) daily prayer, B) the account of conduct, and C) the retreat, together with assemblies or chapters.

#### **1. Daily Prayer**

- a. First of all, the prayer that De La Salle would call **“interior,” “of the heart,”** “from our depths.” It is a prayer that springs from the heart about what happens to us, from our ordinary trials and joys, from loneliness and desolation as well as the profound delight we derive from the life of our dearest or most trying relationships, from the successes or failures in our work, from the rejections and persecutions we feel from society and the Church, etc. They would be experiences sufficiently intense as to become meaningful memories that impact on our consciousness. For De La Salle, many of the personal rules he imposed upon himself, formed and sustained that attitude of prayer from the heart of the employ, without making a distinction between the things that related to the spiritual life and with the professional life, because all was the Work of God, considering himself in everything as an instrument in the hands of God, always attentive to his orders. *Domine, Opus Tuum.*

- b. And, from here, sprang a prayer that is not either exclusively mental, intellectual, or of many words expressing grandiose ideas. Nor is it all affect, with emotions movingly felt. It is, however, a prayer that becomes **a prayer of silence**, of listening, of “simple attention,” above all in the most extreme context, that of total openness.

It is in that fertile soil in which we place ourselves in an attitude of listening, where three movements arise in prayer: the first, to recognize that God is present in all those signs that surround us along the way: the poor, the Brothers, each individual Brother, that place where the community meets, the Church, with the Most Blessed Sacrament, in the midst of all of us. Thousands of signs that we come to know with awe, identifying ourselves with the prayer of the unique Prayer, Jesus Mediator and High Priest united with his Father.

- c. This first movement draws us to the second, to the light of the Scripture of the day’s liturgy, where we contemplate the action and the word of Jesus, admiring it also actualized in the life of his disciples throughout the whole history of the Church and we open ourselves to its power so that this mystery of Christ become real in us and we will be able to represent it to our students. From this mystical vision flows the third movement, the **inspirations and movements of the Spirit**. Here a prophetic word breaks through that transforms us by its power, a word that re-evangelizes our life and converts us into authentic disciples and ministers.

These three movements advance us anew toward the concrete reality of life, to impart to it a new meaning with the novelty of the Good News.

Clearly the Lasallian teaching on prayer, understood from an exclusively ethical perspective, or worse, a moralizing one, would reduce this contemplation of the “mysteries, virtues and maxims” to a perfectionist confrontation, to an unhealthy introspection that would empty it of the mystical/prophetic perspectives of the French School of Spirituality. Many Brothers were introduced to the method of prayer of the 17<sup>th</sup> century in this way. Many lay people do not know that teaching. It behooves all of us, Brothers and lay people, to study this practice of interior prayer that unifies our life of faith and of zeal, our experience of God and our work.

## **2. Account of Conduct**

The same fate befell **the weekly, or monthly, “account of conduct”** (*the reddition*). Obligations in this case were reduced to an accounting of conduct in our duties and our virtues, not as discernment of the mystical and prophetic power of Christ actualized in the community of the disciples, but as laws and private obligations in the quest for the abstract ideal of perfection. For de La Salle, the obligations taken on in the community and workplace did not become a measuring up to a list of virtues established a priori. It rather dealt with a realization of the gifts and graces, of the talents one had developed, of the students confided to us, of the work that we do, and not simply of religious instruction but of all the subjects we teach, of the growth of our students who, thanks to our efforts,

are they themselves to become instruments of the Kingdom. The “Directory” of matters of which we are to give an account, published as the Collection of Short Treatises, was not restrictive. And especially, the letters to the Superior, to which De La Salle always responded, were a concrete way to evangelically review the passion that inflames us with the love of God and of the neighbor.

In this sense, the letters to Drolin constitute a beautiful testimony to what this accounting between two associates can be, and the discernment and guidance that De La Salle gave him. Accompanying, affirming, urging, criticizing, recalling points of the common rules and practices of the community were all touched upon in his responses. In this manner both were co-responsible partners in the account rendering.

### 3. Annual Retreat

And finally, **the annual retreat**. We do not have much information about the content of those retreats and unfortunately, in our history, we became more and more dependent on the use of the Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises*. Thus the exercises have had a great impact on the spiritual life of many Brothers. But in recent years, thanks to the work of Brothers Maurice August and Michel Sauvage, we have been able to re-evaluate the sixteen *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* published after the Founder’s death. These constitute, to my way of thinking, a most evident testimony to what is essential to the Lasallian practice on discernment. *Meditations*, divided two by two, to be used each day of the retreat:

Day One: MTR 1 and 2 on the plan of God in establishing the Christian Schools.

Day Two: MTR 3 and 4 on the power of Christ at work in one’s disciples.

Day Three: MTR 5-6 and 7-8, on the functions we carry out in the world of children abandoned in a world that oppresses and perverts them.

Day Four: MTR 9-10 and 11-12, on our obligations, passionately loving in the consecration of our life; sacrificing it for Jesus and the children.

Day Five: MTR 15 and 16 that lead us to discover the joy already revealed in what we do; the joy that opens up an eschatological horizon arising from the present time, of a new world, a new earth and a new heaven.

These meditations make up an authentic hymn to the Father who creates and re-creates, to the Son who redeems and to the Holy Spirit who gathers us into the Church that proclaims the Kingdom. In the framework of the tasks we carry out in our common employ, within God’s plan in history, a history of salvation, they invite us to interior prayer: to the admiration of God present, to the contemplation of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. And they dispose us to the prophetic breakthrough of a word that identifies us, transforms us and sends us forth, renewed in our work.

All the other Meditations written by De La Salle to illuminate the Liturgy of each Sunday as well as the feasts of the saints, in the light of these meditations for the annual retreat, appear to orient with particular “certain accents” our discernment in a ministerial, mystical and prophetic community. These “Christian schools” will henceforth be animated by men and women who progressively abandon themselves to the hands of the Father of the poor, identifying with Jesus the Messiah who announces the Good News to the poor, re-evangelized by the movement of the Spirit who inspires them with the power to touch hearts.

The practices of this community intentionally led to a contemplative and professional attitude along the way of integration of the passion for God and for the poor. Clearly, both at the most dramatic crossroads as in the ordinary happenings of each day, we see ourselves becoming authentic disciples, called to make disciples.

To sum up, let us observe in the course of his life, the progressive loss of self-absorption, and a kenotic deprivation with a view to assume the mystery of God in a history which is the history of salvation for the marginalized, the poor, the abandoned and the very neediest.

It is worth noting, as well, that De La Salle discerns differently over the course of his life. The discernment of a young man is not the same as that of an older person. The discernment centered on one’s personal concerns is quite distinct from that of someone who is trying to respond to community issues or someone who must deal with affairs that concern organizations and institutions. Discernment in moments of relative calm is certainly not the same as that done during moments of crisis.

We also note the Exodus nature of this movement, an on-going departure from a land that is familiar in order to meet and embrace people heretofore unknown to us. De La Salle progresses further along the path of this “emptying of himself” to the total embrace of the Mystery of Christ who was thus regarded by those who were living without any hope of promise and God’s covenant.

You should always be faithful to the interior inspirations and movement: 1) Because ordinarily these are lights that God sheds upon the soul in order to enlighten it as to what must be done to achieve one’s personal good; 2) Because when we are unfaithful to his inspirations, God ceases to grant them to us, seeing them wasted; and 3) Because not being faithful to these inspirations is what St. Paul calls extinguishing the Spirit of God in oneself; and it can even be said that it is resisting the Holy Spirit and inflicting great injury on him.<sup>6</sup>

**B. What are the criteria for spiritual discernment that characterizes this community with the Church?**

You can perform several miracles in regard to both yourselves and your work in your own regard, by an entire fidelity to grace, not letting any movement of grace go by without corresponding with it; in regard to your work, by touching the hearts of the wayward children . . . Such are the miracles that God gives you the power to perform, and which he asks of you.<sup>7</sup>

In his book, *Spiritual Discernment* (2005), Manuel Ruiz Jurado, S.J., Professor Emeritus and Director of the Institute of Spirituality of the Pontifical Gregorian University, examines how discernment has been understood in the history of the Church and asserts that:

The biblical scope of the topic of spiritual direction will remain, in the future, very tied to its application—excessively so, in my opinion—to the realm of spiritual life and in the area of virtue and the diverse spirits that might work against it. Certain other aspects of discernment are not developed in the same way and with the same intensity, as, for example, the signs of the times and, the most fundamental: that of the person of Christ; that of Church doctrines and biblical prophecies; and, even less so, that of the social phenomenon, movements, and ecclesial groups, etc . . .<sup>8</sup>

And, in some way, this same tendency is found in the (Ignatian) *Spiritual Exercises*:

Even in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, with its method, its time for election and its rules for the discernment of spirits, which gave rise to spiritual exercises ever more profound and elaborate, more intricate and structured, but almost always from the point of view of the encounter of an individual with the will of God, his personal spiritual direction, and too often centered on a pre-determined object: that of internal, privatized stirrings of the spirit.<sup>9</sup>

It is most likely that De La Salle was not completely immune from this more intimate and private accent that was so prevalent in the history of the Church. Certainly his disciples, the Brothers of the eighteenth century, enthusiastically and ingenuously followed the spiritual tendencies of the Church of their times.

In my view this is precisely what De La Salle does not say nor propose as a practical guide for discernment. He doesn't reduce discernment to an individual activity, an ethical decision, a life choice, or an attempt to detect the interior stirrings of the spirit. His way of discernment—in relationships, lived in community and in the Church, for a mission—is not reduced to an individual activity, to someone with his spiritual director.

He invites us to contemplate a much broader reality than that of private stirrings of the spirit. He exhorts us to take into account and examine social and political realities, educational problems and successes, especially with regard to the lived experience of poor children and abandoned youth, the children of artisans and the poor, the lived events of history. And it is with the light of faith that this critical reflection opens up to a divining of the signs of the times, calling forth a personal and community response.

De La Salle's way of reading and interpreting Scripture, tied to personal, community, professional, social and political events, helps us to discover a process of discernment that is broader and richer, and less centered on the self.

We can analyze these particular characteristics not only in his itinerary but also in his writings. They bear witness to a certain manner of discernment that does not privatize faith nor reduce spiritual life to the practice of virtues.

The criteria that characterizes the manner of discernment of the community of Brothers associated with De La Salle emerges from this itinerary and is articulated and developed in his writings. Consequently, we will attempt to identify those characteristics as they appeared in the principal crossroads moments of this foundational itinerary.

At the same time, we will attempt to authenticate the biblical and theological resonances (references) that these criteria have evoked by examining those meditations that are most related to these crossroads experiences because this writing sustained / supported / informed this daily process of acknowledging the action of the Spirit in the Brothers' lives, in allowing themselves to be transformed by the power of grace through prayer and Eucharist. And, in order to make present and place this transforming power within the reach of those whom God has confided to us in our daily work and ministry.

Clearly, a presentation of all the “iconic images” of the *Meditations* would far surpass the limits and goal of this talk. Consequently, we will limit ourselves here to the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, written toward the end of this foundational itinerary and addressed to the “Community of the Christian Schools,” precisely in order to celebrate the mystery of its establishment or foundation and in order to discern the demands and obligations, and what God may require of, and hope for them.

- 1. First criterion:** *Attentive to, and impressed by, the reality of the historic moment, we recognize God present in the midst of that history. This historic and theocentric criterion fosters a certain manner or seeing with the eyes of God, through faith, the reality of the poor and marginalized.*

The crossroads that we have examined demonstrate that for De La Salle Faith, especially, is not conceptual. It is action, an ability to see and consider all things . . . a way to do all things . . . and attribute all to **God**; God, who is present in History; and God, contemplated mystically both in reality and prophetically, revealed in the response of those who know how to see, recognize and respond.

A **faith** that inspirits us with a passionate force by the God of the poor; a faith that brings into focus the reality that we are presently living and the conviction that God's actions is always present in it; and the real truth of what is happening in our country and in our history, in the situations of despair that the marginalized, the abandoned and the poor are experiencing.

“The **Gift** of faith and of passionate Zeal” of an adult; the Gift that is lived and expressed concretely by a profession in society in order to transform it—in our case, that of committed educators working in educational programs.

**Iconic images related to this first criterion** (*MTR* nos. 1 and 2)

- God who is good, attentive, provident and present in history, who desires the salvation of all, and who hears the cries of the most abandoned.
- God who created and who brings about a new creation, raising up from the darkness of our history, men and women—educators—called, chosen and endowed with gifts. Enlightened in order to respond through a ministry in society.

- God who raises up, founds and establishes this association, this Society of the Christian Schools. He is there at its origin and in its purpose. He is its *raison d'être*.
- Freely gifted, working and freely giving, the educators consecrate their entire life to that purpose, the realization of the plan of God.
- Ministers of God-in-history in the midst of the poor; Architects, builders, workers in the field that God cultivates.
- Cooperators in the work of God.

**2. Second criterion:** *Seriousness in the professional and missionary commitment and the respect for the “earthly realities”; a way of committing oneself and of re-inventing the service of education and the advancement of the poor.*

At the crossroads where they discerned what God asked of them, De La Salle and his associates understood well the difficulties that the artisans and the poor were living; the inadequate educational structures that marginalized the children and the young of those families; and the inappropriate contents and methodologies.

They intended that the work that they would undertake would be successful; that the school was going to do very well; that the Society would clearly understand the problems, would bring harmony to the lives of the young people that studied with them; and that these young people would find work and a life of dignity.

The criterion “**passion for the service of education for the poor**” with a view to ensure the stability and the continuity of the men committed to the work that was undertaken; gifts and professional talents placed at the service of the mission.

**Iconic images of work in our educational program** (*MTR* nos. 1.2 and 5.6)

- The artisans and the poor, their sons abandoned to themselves. The lack of work, of discipline, of training for a future employment. The human condition and human development. The limitations that presented obstacles have their explanations not just in the paradoxical human condition; they were living in a social and political structure that prevented the development of their human potential.
- The “angels”, messengers who well know that reality of the children and young, of the world and who also know the mysterious plan of God. Messengers who know and who explain, who ascend and descend. Teachers who know the mysterious plan of God and who know besides the human reality. Teachers who incarnate and transcend it.

**3. Third criterion:** *interiority and the centrality of the person of Christ, a Christocentric spirituality; the evangelical instinct; the particular style of living the following of Christ; and the baptismal and/or religious consecration so as to re-present it to our students.*

At all the crossroads, at the great moments of decisions as well as in the everyday ones, along the path of discerning between the forces of death and the forces of life in one’s personal, communal, professional, social and ecclesial life, in each day, there will always be a direct reference to Sacred Scripture.



The “**following of Christ**” in this Society is marked by a way of advancing, with eyes set on Christ to learn from him how to act and what to say to one’s students.

It deals then with a distinct manner of reading the Gospels, so that they become present here and now in our work. Mysticism and prophecy will become inseparable. Prayer and ministry are permeated with each other and mutually nourish each other. And the same Gospel maxims that we teach are the ones that we learn from Jesus and we strive to live.

We are not priests with sacerdotal and liturgical functions. For us the educational place, that is, the relationships that we live with our students, is the place where Christ is present with his liberating power. To affirm this is to recognize that we evangelize not only by the explicit proclamation of the Gospel, but that all we do pedagogically is attentive to what the *Management of the Schools* prescribes, and evangelizes their lives.

The criterion of the passion for Christ and an unconditional love for the application of Scripture seen throughout history, in the work and in lived relationships, are what characterize this sort of ministerial spirituality of a disciple called to make disciples.

**Iconic images relative to the mystery of Christ** (*MTR* nos. 3 and 4)

- The good shepherd that seeks out the lost sheep, calls them by name, cares for them and saves them.
- The community of disciples following in the footsteps of Jesus, learning from him, participating in his ministry.
- The ambassadors of Christ who come to represent him not only because they speak with his authority and power, but because they are becoming united to him, and are Christ for the young here and now.
- His apostles, in community with one another, who are the branches of the vine, are united to the stem, called each one to produce fruit in their ministry.
- The continuous movement out from the center, toward the professional activity and vice-versa.

**4. Fourth criterion:** *the demands of an association for the mission. The development of a Community – relationships of solidarity with one’s colleagues and one’s students – implies the commitment to respect certain exigencies; a way of relating with one another: associated and united with one another for an educational service.*

At each crossroads experience there will be specific persons both inside and outside of the association. We are especially mindful of those who have been entrusted to our care. The requirements of an unconditional love in our professional employment as educators strengthen the covenant with God and the alliance with one another in an association for the ministry.

The criterion of **passionate love for one’s Brothers and for one’s disciples and their families**, the respect in the concrete relationships of solidarity with those with whom we are committed in order to work together and with those whom we serve.

This reference to the families of artisans and the poor as well as to the other educators appears at all the crossroads experiences. They are the motivational force that calls us and draws us into a Society of the Christian Schools. We are not called individually to work alone. We contract certain and specific obligations that demand an answer from us. We are brought together in order to dedicate our whole life to these “friends” who come to us in the dead of night.

**Iconic images relative to our exigencies** (MTR nos. 9.10 and 11.12)

- Prophets driven by zeal, and a passionate love of God and for those entrusted to us, we give ourselves over, and we sacrifice our life for the good of others. We love them. We walk with them with a strong prophetic message, with the best story that will open their eyes for their own conversion. The corrective pedagogy which does not cease to intervene at the appropriate moment has this perspective which is both mystical and prophetic.

**5. Fifth criterion:** *Unconditional love for, and the proclamation of, the Kingdom, building up the body of Christ in a Church-communion; a manner of being and living in the Church and of participation in this unique ecclesial mission by means of our lay ministry.*

There can be no doubt that the experience of Church appears at every crossroads. At times it is the hierarchical Church, oppressive and domineering. At other times, it is rather an apostolic Church that manifests itself as an evangelical communion of Christ, guided through history by bishops, pastors and catechists; all are messengers of the Kingdom. In every case, it is an experience of a small Church, a fragile communion of those called to live the Gospel in order to proclaim it; and the criterion of a passionate zeal for the evangelization and construction of a Church, for and with those who were abandoned, driven away from the promises and covenants.

**Iconic images of the Church and our lay ministry in the Church** (MTR nos. 7 and 8)

- These meditations describe us as apostles and messengers, pastors and catechists, architects who lay the foundations of a temple, of a Church formed not by oppressed disciples, but by men and women, aware of their calling to take part in the covenants and promises. We are like the community of the apostles, like the bishops with whom we work faithfully. We are ministers of the Church.

**6. Sixth criterion:** *A hope against all hope, revealing how the Kingdom is growing here and now and awaiting the revelation of the new heaven and the new earth.*

Each crossroads experience implies a before and an after. A horizon that closes down, that is shattered, and a new one that comes into view, each time even greater, until it surpasses all horizons. The hope that is ever new of what we are and what we do effectively causes God’s plan to become a reality, even in failure and on the cross.

This eschatological criterion does not thrust us into a distant or transcendent future which is ignorant of reality. It teaches us to be aware of that definitive and transcendent horizon, most surely, but one that imparts to us a more critical perspective of the present, in which we must render an account of all the obligations we have contracted for the purpose of transforming society, here and now, and recognizing the signs of the Kingdom that we await. As a

consequence this impassioned hope incites us to all that we are and all that we do under the critical judgment of the word, each day, in order to render accounts. This hope is the ever new source of evangelical joy because we realize that through our efforts the number of the just is increased.

**Some iconic images** (*MTR* nos. 13, 14 and 14-16)

- We are the supervisors, the administrators, the landlords of God in the here-and-now.
- We make judgments and discern between what is true and what is false each day, here and now, taking into account not just our personal obligations, but especially all those related to the work to which we are called and rewarded.
- We give an account of the gifts, of the persons entrusted to us and of the ministry.
- We are servants who rejoice both here and at the final horizon.
- Saviors who are at the same time saved by those whom we serve in our work.
- We are stars for all eternity because we have lived and taught justice.

**C. Discernment at this present historical moment.**

And now it is our turn. Each one personally, and afterwards, in small groups, let us try to listen and respond to the movement of the Spirit at this lived moment.

The reports from the different regions that we have been hearing in the previous days have provided us with ample material for reflection and prayer, and to discern together the reality that we are now living.

- What are the critical concerns (with regard to the educational mission, to the association for the mission, and to the structures) which have the greatest impact on us, those that we need to consider, just as De La Salle and his associates had to deal with in their own time?
- As we reflect on the itinerary of De La Salle and his associates, what questions, what challenges, what action-steps taken, might address the critical concerns we have identified in the previous question?
- What icons and texts from Scripture shed light on our critical concerns?
- What are the icons for today: the persons and the works in today's world? In our regions? Which of these best articulate and reveal our critical concerns?

“Do not dwell on the things of the past, nor remember the days of yore. See, I am going to make something new that is already bursting forth. Do you not see it?”<sup>10</sup>

## Notes

1. John Baptist de La Salle, *Meditations*, 44 1.2.
2. John Baptist de La Salle, *Memoir of the Beginnings*.
3. John Baptist Blain. *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle* (Vol. 1, Book 1). Translated by Richard Arnandez. Romeoville, IL: Lasallian Publications, 1982. In CL 7 (1961), 191-192.
4. JBD, *Memoir of the Beginnings*.
5. Document of the election of De La Salle as Superior on June 7, 1694, Vaugirard, France.
6. JBD, *O.C. Rec*, 13, 18.
7. JBD, *O.C. Meditation* 180, 3.2.
8. Manuel Ruiz Jurado, S.J. *Spiritual Discernment*, 2005, p. XIV.
9. Ruiz Juarado, *Spiritual Discernment*, p. XVI.
10. Isaiah 43: 18-19.