
What Innovation Looks Like throughout Lasallian History

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1. Introduction

In the nineteenth century, Ralph Waldo Emerson made a statement that I think applies well to John Baptist de La Salle and the educational movement that bears his name. The statement is this: "The creation of a thousand forests is in one acorn."

If we think of De La Salle as that one acorn, the wide extent of Lasallian Catholic educational institutions throughout the world are the forests. The trees in those forests are the different places and ministries, and teachers and leaders there are the branches. Finally, the leaves on the trees are all those who benefit from life that comes from the twigs and branches, from the tree and its roots, and from the wider forest itself.

I don't want to run the analogy to the ground, but I do want to establish at the outset that when we talk about Lasallian history, we are talking about a living history, an ongoing history, a history that draws on centuries of lived experience, of thoughtful practice, of people and places not our own. In the best sense of the word, we come out of and are carried by our tradition, which according to G. K. Chesterton "means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead." They are what give us life.

Ours is the ongoing journey of the educational life that began in 1680 in a small city in northeast France, and a small group of marginally – very marginally – competent teachers whose relatively unwilling leader was finishing his doctorate in theology and part of a social class that kept itself well-insulated from direct dealings with the poor, although indirectly helping the poor was considered a virtue.

When it comes to innovation, this first group of teachers saw De La Salle living a different kind of life, engaged with the circumstances and people around him. To him, invitations and events were calls from God. Each circumstance provided a providential encounter with God's presence in his life: something to be listened to, prayed about, and responded to. This is a foundational aspect of De La Salle's life journey, and a major catalyst for his innovative responses. There is a YouTube video in which Brother Gerard Rummery makes the point well.³

2. De La Salle & Innovation

De La Salle was the acorn; and the forests grew because of his priorities, his approaches, and his responses; in a word, because of his spirituality.

Let's now take just a few key moments from the beginnings of this educational movement to see how that genuine respect for, and engagement with, the events in his life – events that he saw as calls from God – provided the invitation and substance of his innovative disposition.

It was a providential encounter with a layman from Rouen at the door of a Sister's convent that started the ball rolling. Adrien Nyel had been sent to Rheims to start a school for poor boys; and he told De La Salle about it, explaining his purpose and plans. De La Salle cautioned him about some of the political realities in Rheims, but also said, in effect, "Let's see how I can help you." Here is, I submit, the first clear decision that displays his innovative disposition. He could have let the ball pass. He could have wished Nyel good luck and a prayer. He could have given him some advice then and there, and left it at that. He could have gone on with his life as it was.

But he didn't. He convened a carefully chosen group of religious leaders that could help determine how best to help Adrian Nyel get a small school for poor boys started. From that first meeting at De La Salle's house in Rheims, thoughtful innovation became part of the DNA of what would become the Lasallian charism. It was this group's discussion that led to a shared decision that they could do something about this together.

Like many such charity schools at the time, the funding for this school for poor boys was provided by what today we would call a large endowment, which paid a minimal salary for the teachers. One of the consulting group's own members, the pastor of a nearby parish, wanted a school for the poor. He was also best placed to face the likely opposition of city officials, of different interest groups, and of fee-paying schools that were already established. Since the Council of Trent had allowed pastors to set up parish schools independently of any outside authority, civic or otherwise, this pastor could stand up for his rights; and the school at the parish of Saint Maurice started soon thereafter in April of 1679.

By the end of that year, there were three such schools in Rheims, filled with six teachers that were recruited by Adrian Nyel and financed by endowments established by dying widows or donated funds. Between 400-500 students were now being taught in these schools. Since De La Salle had assured one such widow whose funds supported one of the schools that he would make sure the teachers did a good job, he felt compelled to do what he could to fulfill that promise. As a result, he now had to take a set of steps that he had never anticipated.

Over a period of a year, he visited the classrooms, rented a house for the teachers to live in, had meals brought to them from his own house, invited them over for an Easter retreat, and finally had them come to his family home daily so that *they* could have their meals with him, and so that he could help with their teaching, with their classes and school organization, and also with their table manners.

De La Salle's involvement greatly helped the layman in charge, Adrian Nyel, who was actually better at *starting* schools than at *running* them, and who was often away to start new schools elsewhere. But more importantly, this arrangement gave the teachers confidence and personal encouragement, allowing them to ask their questions and discuss their teaching methods on a regular basis. De La Salle inspired their motivation, urging them to lean on God's help; and he provided them with a way to pursue a genuine teaching *vocation*. Some stayed. Some left. Some

joined. But De La Salle persisted. God had continued to leave these teachers under his guidance, and he would not abandon them. *They* would have to abandon *him*, because then God's will would then be clear.

Consider that if all the teachers had left and if the schools had closed, it is doubtful that De La Salle would have continued in this work. He was an ordained priest, very well educated, a canon of the cathedral with rich benefits and extensive responsibilities, and very well placed socially among a host of wealthy, well-connected family members and acquaintances. He would have plenty to do and would do it well if this little venture didn't pan out.

But De La Salle was known to be somewhat stubborn; and he was deeply attentive to his spiritual life, his daily encounters with God in prayer, with others, and with the world around him. This is dangerous. (Creativity is coming up with new ways of doing things; innovation is actually doing them.) He was just the kind of person who would do something instead of just thinking or dreaming about it.

A year after he had invited the teachers to join him daily for meals and advice, he traveled to Paris to consult with Father Nicolas Barré, a well-respected, holy priest involved with education for the poor, and well connected with others involved in this same kind of ministry. Barré's advice was uncompromising. When following the Gospel, innovation's call can be very stark. Barré said, "Bring them into your house to live with you." He also urged De La Salle to trust completely on God's providence in everything that he did.

It took another six months; but when the lease to the house that the teachers were living in expired, he brought the teachers into his family home. On June 24, 1681, the teachers moved into the house; and De La Salle's family protested and tried to stop him, but to no avail. Some of his family went elsewhere; one of his younger brothers remained in the house; and his brother-in-law sued him for the house, which indeed was sold a year later.

The eight or so teachers and De La Salle moved to a poorer part of town, where they could develop their own identity and their own ministry. Four Brothers were in two schools located outside of Rheims, so the whole group of about twelve was still rather small. But they were now entirely on their own; and the determination, intelligence, expertise, and commitment that De La Salle brought to the enterprise fueled the innovations they would bring about.

This is a good place to put De La Salle's innovative character in context. The nature of his innovative disposition arose from within his religious character and was applied to his specific social context. He was driven by an ongoing passion for saintly personal activities, yet he knew that they were part of an established social and clerical system. They would organize themselves in such a way that their internal lives and their public lives were integrated and focused on the good they were meant to do for the students entrusted to their care. Today we call this the Spirit of Faith and Zeal. It was already a major innovation to have such a group at all, at that time in France.

The priority was not to fit in with the established systems – even their unique role was strange to others – but rather to do what was needed to ensure that the schools ran well and that those teaching

in them were able to do so through their shared personal and community lives. De La Salle never sought official approval for the group during his lifetime, although he knew how to do so. For him, this group of teachers, these Brothers, would represent something new in the Church; a committed group of educators who were not clerical and were not lay persons. Rather they would live as a religious community with the primary purpose of following the Gospel together through the ministry of teaching together.

De La Salle's leadership style was itself innovative. Biographer Dom François-Elie Maillefer puts it this way:

But as he had resolved to introduce nothing by authority and wished to give them attraction for virtue without constraint, he was content in these beginnings to lead them by the hand, making them relish the truths he taught them by his exhortations and still more by his example. He applied himself in this way all this year to accustom the masters to a set of exercises with which he made them familiar in a way they did not notice.⁴

We may see this as appropriate and fairly common these days; but in seventeenth century France, it was certainly the exception. This leadership style was also the reason why he was so well loved and respected by the Brothers. This kind of approach perfectly engaged a group of interested and committed educators ready to make a difference for the students they worked with every day.

Now that we've looked at some of the foundational aspects of the Lasallian historical narrative, especially those that reveal a theme of creativity and innovation from the very beginnings of the Institute, other examples of innovation during De La Salle's lifetime can only be mentioned briefly and in summary.

2.1. *Simultaneous Teaching*

The generally accepted teaching methodology of the time, with few exceptions, was memorization and one-to-one recitation in front of a single teacher. In 1654, when De La Salle was only three years old, Jacques de Batencour had anonymously written a book called *The Parish School (L'Ecole Paroissiale)*, providing instructions on how to use simultaneous teaching methods in a parish. Some private girls schools, *Port Royal* schools, and schools in other countries began to use simultaneous education for teaching large groups of students at the same time. When De La Salle and the first Brothers began to teach, they took that model as their own. They improved, refined, and detailed its components to align and improve it according to their own pedagogical priorities. Review and adapt. Over the decades, they standardized and systematized its application throughout France, eventually creating *The Conduct of the Christian Schools* book⁵ as the popular successor to *The Parish School*. A Brother could now be moved from Calais in the north to Marseilles in the south and substitute for another teacher without missing a beat in the lessons. *The Conduct*, as the book is called, became a regularly updated standard guide for simultaneous instruction throughout the country and in other parts of the world.

2.2. *Gratuity for All*

From the very beginning, Lasallian education was also entirely gratuitous.

De La Salle writes that in the Christian Schools, “teaching is offered free of charge and entirely for the glory of God . . . your teaching must be gratuitous; this is essential for your Institute.”⁶ The Brothers were absolutely forbidden to receive any gifts, favors, or keepsakes from the students or their parents – especially tobacco, apparently. This not only guaranteed an equal relationship with all the students, it also maintained De La Salle's conviction that gratuitous instruction was the sole means of effectively and convincingly accomplishing the ends of Christian education. It's like the simplicity of life for Saint Francis – uncompromising, convincing, and costly. Like the Gospel itself, this education *would be gratuitous*.⁷ The principle also applied to children who attended his schools but could have paid something. In fact, De La Salle got into trouble with others not because he was teaching the poor, but because he didn't stick to it, insisting on offering a free education to everyone who showed up at the door. This was an innovation that had real consequences for him and the Brothers. But *they* were willing to pay the price.

2.3. French vs. Latin

The traditional way of teaching someone to read in school, during the time of De La Salle, was to start with Latin words and phrases. De La Salle and the Brothers did the opposite. In fact, he wrote a defense for teaching reading by way of the language the students used daily. In a letter to a bishop who asked him to have his Brothers teach students Latin before teaching them French, he explained the reasons for *not* doing so.⁸ He said that teaching French was much more practical than teaching Latin. French is easier to learn, takes less time, is more useful, may be a vehicle for learning Latin later, and is a necessary tool for learning other things (like Christian doctrine). Besides, Latin is of little use to working people. There's not enough time to master it in the few years that students spend in the Brothers' schools; and those who come to know only a little of it, and that poorly, would look foolish trying to use it.

2.4. Schoolbooks

It is one thing to establish good Christian education by providing a well-trained group of teachers. But a school also needs a variety of books. And if something was needed, De La Salle would provide it, writing it himself, if necessary. Hence, this doctor of theology wrote everything from *Exercises of Piety for the Use of the Christian Schools* (1696), *Instructions and Prayers for Holy Mass* (1698), *Teaching French Syllables* (1698), *How to Go to Confession* (1698), *Prayers for Confession and Communion* (1698?), *The Rules of Christian Politeness and Civility* (1702), *Spiritual Canticles for the Use of the Christian Schools* (1703), *The Duties of a Christian* or *The Catechism of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (1703); and in collaboration with the Brothers he wrote *The Conduct of the Christian Schools* (1720) over a forty year period. For most of these books, De La Salle studied and referenced other similar books, borrowing and adapting those elements he found to be most helpful. It should also be noted that the Brothers themselves also began to write textbooks and reference works for schools, an enterprise that would become ubiquitous over the next two centuries.

2.5. Local Educational Needs

In places like Calais, Avignon, Marseilles, and Grenoble, schools taught subjects based on local needs and the likely employment prospects that students would face. In Calais, for example, where students were sons of sailors, subjects related to sailing, hydrography, geometry, navigation, and business affairs were part of the curriculum. In towns that were involved in commercial trade or manufacturing, it might be bookkeeping or design. The intention was to provide the kind of practical education that students and parents wanted or needed, along with the basic skills of reading, writing, and mathematics, and combining all that with Christian formation, social formation in politeness and civility, and catechetical training. The best way to accomplish that was to be sensitive to the real needs of the students and their potential future. The two to three years that they would spend in school, if that, would need to prepare them for the rest of their lives. Lasallian education was a terminal formal education.

2.6. Teacher Training

Very soon after he had begun to work closely with the small group of teachers in Rheims, training them in their ministry, De La Salle responded to the great need for teachers in the outlying villages by offering to train country schoolmasters along with the Brothers. In 1687, he began to take in young men from the villages around the diocese of Rheims, chosen and sent by their parish priests for being trained as teachers. He housed the first group of twenty-five in a building adjacent to that occupied by the Brothers. De La Salle oversaw their formation as Christian educators, and these teachers-in-training shared many common activities with the Brothers. After a few of these groups from the outlying parishes had been trained, no further teachers were needed for the country schools; and the program came to an end. But twice more during his forty years with the Brothers, De La Salle would establish centers where teachers who were not Brothers could be trained and prepared for the ministry of education. Thus, he is credited with having started one of the very first teacher-training programs in France.

2.7. Unique Educational Responses

While most of the Christian Schools were primary schools, De La Salle was open to answering whatever education needs were presented to him. When he learned that young day workers in Paris needed training and instruction, the Brothers established a Sunday School for working men under the age of twenty who wished either to continue their education beyond the elementary level or to learn to read and write if they had never attended school. Two of De La Salle's most talented Brothers taught reading, writing, mathematics, draftsmanship, catechism, and art on Sunday afternoons in what was called a "Christian Sunday Academy."

Another instance occurred after King James II had fled Ireland in 1688. De La Salle was asked to teach the sons of those nobles who had fled with the King. One of his biographers, Dom François-Elie Maillefer, noted that

he boarded them all and filled his (the Brothers') house. He himself took particular care of their education, without counting entirely on the vigilance of the Brother he put in charge

of them. So that in a short time they were able to fill with honor the various places for which they were destined.⁹

The intent was to educate these fifty Irish boys and prepare them for future careers in France, either as part of the gentry or in the business community. In effect, the Brothers in this instance took on the education of refugees.

2.8. *Saint Yon*

The place where some of the most significant innovations occurred was at the Brothers 17.5-acre property on the outskirts of Rouen, a place called Saint Yon. Leased in 1705 and finally purchased in 1718, it became the heart of the religious and educational enterprise of the Brothers. It included a manor house, spacious gardens, and a quiet environment. Here the novices were trained, the annual retreat was held, the Brothers came to retire, and three new ministries were begun and subsequently flourished.

There was a boarding school for older boys who were destined for careers in commerce and industry. It came about because of requests from parents whose sons were not going on to university but needed more education than their primary schools had provided (the Brothers ran a number of gratuitous primary schools in Rouen). The parents wanted classes that focused on trade and industry prospects. The Brothers provided classes in history, geography, literature and rhetoric, accounting, geometry, architecture, natural history, hydrography, mechanics, cosmography, differential calculus, music, and modern languages. In effect, the program provided the first secondary school curriculum of its kind, both practical and scholastic. It also turned out to be very successful.¹⁰

And there was a separate facility at Saint Yon for delinquent or “incorrigible” children, where young men were strictly supervised outside of common classes with the other students. This had also been established through a request from parents, who knew that their sons had character difficulties and needed a special kind of education. These “incorrigible” students joined with the others for studies, prayers, and catechism lessons; and if their behavior improved, they might join the other students by moving over to the boarding school side of the property.

The great success with this second group led town authorities to ask the Brothers to now also have a detention center for young men, and even grownups, who had caused some scandal or had been confined by the courts. And so special arrangements were made for that third group, locked in their rooms and allowed to communicate only when their attitude, or changed mental health, allowed for it. Gradually, they may be allowed to come together at meals or do manual work or follow some of the studies provided to the other groups. The successes that De La Salle and the Brothers achieved outweighed the difficulties these new ventures presented, and the income that Saint Yon generated – from parents and town officials – served to support the work elsewhere. De La Salle was especially attentive to this last group of detainees, visiting and speaking with them as he led them to reform their lives for the better.

In all of this, both the Brothers and De La Salle himself created the programs that were needed to address the needs that were placed before them. *Innovation was not only an opportunity; it was a manifestation of their ministry and vocation.*

Other examples of innovation could be mentioned about the Brothers vows and community life, or De La Salle's strategies of unifying and inspiring them. But this short overview will be enough to make the point that innovation is a constitutive dimension of the Lasallian educational endeavor.

Please keep these foundational elements in mind, because what follows was carried by the currents that emerged from the years when De La Salle directly shaped the nature of the Institute and the scope of its educational endeavors.

3. Innovation through the Years

Let's now take a look at how this innovative spirit continued on through the centuries.

3.1. *The Eighteenth Century*

In the eighteenth century,¹¹ two areas of innovation stand out: 1) how the Brothers organized themselves, and 2) the kinds of educational works that they took on.

When the schools in the south of France grew in number and size, a novitiate – or training center for new Brothers – was established in Avignon. If local candidates to the Brothers had to first travel up to Paris or Rouen for training and then return to teach in or around Avignon, their preparation would lack the local cultural and linguistic character that made the area unique, especially at that time in French history. Both for the benefit of the students and for the proper training of the teachers, it made sense to locate a training center where those Brothers were most likely to serve.

Another example is how they worked within the Church culture of the time. When local clergy or bishops tried to pressure them to change their structure or priorities – after all, they were only Brothers – the Brothers were quietly active in the background, seeking good advice, insisting on their unique position and independent character, and making decisions that would circumvent the problem without appearing to be defiant. One Superior General, for example, when the Archbishop in Rouen claimed authority over the Brothers because their central government resided at Saint Yon, simply moved the central offices to another diocese, and a later one established three provinces in France.

In their educational work, along with their schools, Brothers were asked to work in what were called *General Hospitals*: places for the destitute, the chronically ill, the elderly poor, orphans, and the insane. For many years, small groups of Brothers worked in these places, teaching the boys and serving the others in residence. It was grueling, difficult, and demanding work. And it was a much different environment than the well-ordered, familiar, and uniform circumstances of the solidly established Christian Schools, which may be the reason why this ministry did not become generally prevalent in the Institute. However, the fact that it was done at all, and apparently done

well, attests to the willingness of the Brothers to respond to educational needs for the poor wherever and however they arose.

What became much more prominent were *boarding schools* that the Brothers ran along with the gratuitous primary schools for the poor. Such boarding schools were income producing and were like the one first developed at Saint Yon. Classes addressed local needs, and the fees supported the other schools. In fact, this became a problem for the Brothers in charge, who tried to limit the number of such boarding schools, since it appeared to go against the principle of a strict dependence on Providence and gratuity of service. But the Brothers on the ground knew that these boarding schools helped them to remain gratuitous for the poor while also providing an education for older youngsters who needed a different kind of education than that which society allowed for at the time.

At the end of the eighteenth century, during the French revolution, the major innovation of the Brothers was *trying to find a way to not get killed*. All the properties – schools, communities, even furniture – were taken over by the government and the Brothers were thrown out. They had to take an official oath of loyalty, the refusal of which led many to be imprisoned and some killed. Being a religious was enough to be arrested, tried, and executed. Brothers were often grouped with priests and bishops when antireligious laws became the norm. In fact, it is remarkable how many documents exist where Brothers wrote or publicly defended their unique role as laymen with simple vows who had dedicated their lives to educating the poor without financial compensation. But often it wasn't enough to dissuade those in charge, who as likely as not believed that the Brothers were trying to talk themselves out of an identity that appeared obvious to their captors. There were many and diverse ways that former Brothers, whether actually former or not, and secularized Brothers, whether internally secularized or not, continued to be employed in State and private schools, together or separately. Individual stories attest to the spectrum of possibilities that occurred. The innate, innovative skill by which most Brothers negotiated these social circumstances showed the years of experience in schools made up of very clever youngsters. I recently discovered that in one place, five of the Brothers officially “secularized” but remained in the same house – even when four of them got married! – until the end of the Revolution. That must have been an interesting community life!

3.2. *The Nineteenth Century*

The nineteenth century¹² was a time of rebuilding. At the end of the French Revolution, of the 750 or so Brothers who had been very active in the schools, about 250 of them could be accounted for. One hundred sixty of these were still involved in teaching of some kind. But it was the 28 Brothers who had stayed together in Lyons that became the core group for the reestablishment of the Institute in France, and it was here that the few Brothers who had escaped to our schools in Italy returned. One hundred ten former Brothers in France also returned.

The government now wanted the Brothers to oversee all of primary education in France. And they would be compensated for it. In effect, the schools would now be government sponsored. The Brothers agreed to do so only if they could provide a fully gratuitous education at their primary schools. Most authorities agreed, but some tried to have parents pay for their son's education to

the town councils, who would then pay the Brothers. This was vigorously opposed by the Brothers; and many discussions, protests, and compromises were devised. But the point is that the major innovation was a willingness to become what we in the USA call Charter Schools today, but only if they could maintain their essential commitment to gratuitous education.

During the nineteenth century, the number of schools and communities in France fluctuated because of the seesaw of the century's politics. Overall, the number of Brothers and schools increased dramatically, growing almost tenfold between 1830 and 1875, when over 12,000 Brothers, lived in some 1,200 communities and ran twice as many schools all over France.

The work of the Brothers also further diversified. Brothers began to provide lessons on "the art of teaching." A Training College for teachers was established in Rouen, although not on the property of Saint Yon, which was never returned to the Brothers after the French Revolution. The Sunday Academy for older students was revived for various towns and groups, and Brothers began to teach children in houses of correction.

Boarding schools were also brought back and many more were established. These were private schools and therefore not subject to full government control. But permission was sought from the Holy See, since such income-producing schools were not strictly permitted under the official *Bull of Approbation of 1725*. The newly established schools concentrated on teaching students in the areas of local commerce or business.

Schools for adults and apprentices were established. Evening schools, midday schools, and Sunday schools addressed unique training and formation needs, accommodated to the students' working time schedules. And special boarding schools for apprentices allowed young people to work, learn, and have a place to live.

The classic guide, *The Conduct of Schools*, was revised and reedited in Lyon and republished in 1828. New religious congregations were founded when even the increase of Brothers and their schools could not fulfill the demand. Many of these new groups looked to the Brothers and their long educational history and experience to establish themselves and their works, carrying this classic school guidebook to missionary countries outside of France.

The other major ministry that emerged was *prison ministry*. From 1840 on, after authorities were impressed with the work of two Brothers in Paris who taught children condemned to prison, groups of Brothers increasingly taught and catechized in prisons. Eventually, over a hundred Brothers worked with 7,000 prisoners in prisons throughout France, including one in Rheims, and others in Belgium and Italy. They even had their own Brother Visitor assigned to them.

With the increased number of Brothers, an expansion into other parts of the world began in 1837 with the arrival of the Brothers in Canada. This was followed by a definitive reintroduction of the Brothers in the USA in 1848 – the first attempt in 1817 had failed, and two Brothers sent from Canada a few years earlier had died. Appeals for Brothers for Malaysia and Singapore led to a group of American and European Brothers arriving there in November of 1852. Uniquely, they ran their schools with many non-Brothers employed as teachers. And during the next few decades,

groups of Brothers started schools in North Africa, Egypt, England, India, Burma, Ecuador, Vietnam, Madagascar, and Sri Lanka. In some places, such as England and India, there were long periods of failure largely due to language, cultural adaptation, or leadership challenges before becoming established. Brothers may have demonstrated a great willingness to innovate and improvise, but failure is a clear and severe teacher as well. Eventually, successful schools were established in all these countries.

The end of the nineteenth century saw the increasing secularization of society and public institutions, especially among the schools in France. Most of the population might have been Catholic, but they were not able to stop the secularization programs enacted by those leading the French Republic; and the Brothers, as the largest teaching congregation in France, bore the brunt of their efforts to secularize all of society. A series of laws starting in the 1880s led to the Brothers' exclusion from teaching in publicly supported schools, and it culminated in the suppression of the Institute in France in 1904. But this also made many Brothers available for overseas assignments, where more attention would now be paid to local conditions and needs, along with a general desire for less uniformity in the Institute as a whole. Structural innovation was emerging.

3.3. *The Twentieth Century*

Just a few more specifics, or *observations*, about the state of innovative education as the Brothers moved into the twentieth century.¹³

First: A much wider financial support spectrum emerged for various ministries. Some were supported by a public authority, and others were strictly private schools. The preference and intent was to lean more toward gratuitous non-fee-paying schools, maintaining as far as possible the principle of gratuity. But both necessity and practical needs allowed for the development of educational models that brought income. In the 1920s, for example, roughly half of all the schools were non-fee-paying schools. The others were private schools that looked to school fees for their financial sustainability.

Second: As countries made primary education obligatory, the movement into secondary schools became attractive; and Brothers schools started to include both levels on the same premises. Eventually, secondary schools became preferred for financial self-sufficiency reasons, and they could support a non-fee-paying school elsewhere. Secondary education also became the new “terminal education” for young people, the last education that they would have.

Third: Vocational training schools helped students and adults improve their professional qualifications. Evening schools for apprentices were less needed or popular, having been associated with primary school students. The training of craftsmen, artisans, and artists became particularly successful among the large and extensive Saint Luke Schools network in Belgium, which continue to this day.

Fourth: Science, modern languages, literature, hands-on technical training, and agriculture and the like became part of secondary schools, especially in those schools located outside of France.

Military academies brought in intense physical training and discipline. And youth adjudication centers continued to be part of the Brothers ministries in the USA and elsewhere.

Fifth: From the middle of the nineteenth century up to today, there was an increasing interest and involvement in higher education. This was particularly acute in the United States, where for some seventy years the Brothers advanced the teaching of Latin – officially forbidden by the Brother’s *Rule* – through special permission. Lack of clarity and documentation, however, caused untold miseries for Brothers and others when the French superiors pushed back hard, removing American Visitors and college presidents, and sending them into exile. This so-called “Latin Question” was not resolved until 1923 with the direct intervention of the Pope. But its ripples are felt to this day when there are over 60 Lasallian universities around the world.

Sixth: Brothers contributed to the field of education through running teacher training colleges, writing school textbooks, starting printing presses, and initiating pedagogical review journals. One Lasallian scholar has researched and documented over 24,000 titles that were written by Brothers worldwide from our foundation to the present day. The vast majority of these books were on education-related topics.

Seventh: Increasingly, since the end of the nineteenth century, lay teachers became more prominent in Lasallian schools. While originally brought in due to necessity, after Vatican Council II that necessity was seen as an advantage. Today, less than 3% of those working in Lasallian schools are Brothers and the vast majority are men and women Lasallian educators. This has benefited both the Brothers and their educational Partners. The great innovation lies in how the Institute was and remains on the forward edge of this vocational partnership, largely I believe because the Brothers have been, and are, dispositionally closer to the laity than to the hierarchy or clerical world. Plus, today as ever before, the Institute exists to advance its ministry, not the number of Brothers.

4. Innovation Today

That’s a lot of information. But it gives a snapshot of the main thrust of the developments that happened during the twentieth century and that are happening to this day. We follow a line of innovative, practical, need-based, Gospel-inspired, and people-driven educational services, especially for those who are in need, and primarily young people. The growth of this Institute reaches ever wider and deeper with its educational roots and branches. That small acorn has spawned many trees and forests, and each continues to grow and expand with the same DNA.

In more recent years, an example of this is, first and most significantly, the primary, second, tertiary, and special schools and education programs that are currently in place around the world in ever-expanding numbers. It is to be noted that today more students are being taught in more places by more Lasallian educators and fewer active Brothers than ever before in the history of the Institute.¹⁴ If this isn’t a providential indicator, I don’t know what is.

But along with these schools, there are many examples of innovative educational projects that *complement* the core focus of our educational work. In fact, these innovative educational projects

are possible *because of* the foundational reach of our established educational institutions. An Institute publication from 2003 says this well:

The Institute offers to those who work in it an overall framework which defines the main characteristics of its educational work and its particular thrust. By its permanence in time and its recognized efficacy, this framework functions as a model which provides assurance and makes innovation possible.¹⁵

A strong tree can confidently send its roots and branches in many directions.

A second example of the ever-expanding network of branches of this is when the Institute received the NOMA Prize for Literacy. In September of 1990, the United Nations-declared International Literacy Year, Superior General Brother John Johnson accepted UNESCO's NOMA Literacy Prize in Geneva, Switzerland. The document that had been prepared to support the nomination amazed organizers and journalists with the scope, breadth, and hidden nature of Lasallian education. The Brothers response to inquiries it received about this was that this was just part of our normal work and reflects the nature of our commitment to education. It highlights the fact that many, if not most, of our innovative educational work is little known or celebrated publicly, which I think is probably fine with many of us. We are less like strident trumpets and more like muted French horns.

Another significant relatively recent development has been the growth of Miguel and Cristo Rey Schools in the USA. In 1993, the Lasallian Christian Brothers opened the first San Miguel School in Providence, RI. Its replication led to the formation of the *Lasallian Association of Miguel Schools*. This middle school model for young students from low-income families, includes an extended day averaging 9.5 hours and an extended academic year of up to 11 months. The average total enrollment at a member school is 70 students with an average class size of 19 students. There are 11 Miguel schools in the USA today.

Cristo Rey Jesuit High School in Chicago, IL, was founded in 1996 to prepare youth from low-income families for post-secondary educational opportunities. Five years later, De La Salle North Catholic in Portland, Oregon, became the second school to take on that model. Cristo Rey schools integrate four years of college preparatory academics with continuous professional work experience that pays most of the cost of a student's education. Students job-share an entry-level position at businesses around the community one day a week and go to the school the rest of the week. The school uniform is business dress. There are currently 5 Cristo Rey Lasallian Schools in the USA.

Many other examples – too many to include here – of recent Lasallian innovative educational programs around the world may be found in the *Appendix*.

5. Conclusion

What, then, can we conclude about innovation in the Lasallian world, both in the past and present? Here are five points:

- Innovational initiatives take place both within and outside of the traditional educational framework.
- The spirit of creative fidelity and openness to new educational needs was present in De La Salle's time as much as it is in our own.
- There seem to be two approaches – seeds of innovation – in the creation of new educational initiatives.
 - Some organization or structure within the Institute (General Chapter, District Council, ad hoc committee) sets up the program, framework, and financing, based on a request, a perceived and studied need, or a formal Institute initiative.
 - A person or persons together allow themselves to be moved, just as De La Salle and the group he consulted were moved when Adrien Nyel asked for help. People then as now respond to a perceived educational need, discuss it with others, and conclude that something could be done together. Results, structure, and financing are not certain; but the relationships between the partners is more important than the establishment of structures, which reflects an Institute-wide preference for people over structures.¹⁶
- We tend to do better with structures that we create or adapt ourselves, rather than those that others have created.
- We address the needs of real people in the here and now, but with a vision for where individuals will be in 5 to 10 years from now. This requires careful listening and attention, patience, and mental / cultural mobility – and sometimes physical mobility – all of which can be and should be disorienting. That's how change happens.

What, then, can we say “innovation” is, based on our experience? Here is a good definition. Innovation is

an initiative which produces something new in terms of relations, procedures, understanding and, in the last resort, of structures. It is not simply an adaptation to a new situation, but a different way of seeing reality, of relating to it, of allowing oneself to be transformed by this new relationship. In a word, innovation alters people as much as it alters their way of creating society.¹⁷

The best conclusion that can be made from our 340 years of experience in the area of innovation was made by Br. Nicolas Capelle, FSC:

Innovation is necessary for our Institute and for the lay people associated with it. It is at the same time the source of the “foundation” of persons, and of the refoundation of the social body we form. It is innovation which nourishes and diversifies our fidelity.¹⁸

Simply by looking at our history – even by way of a cursory look such as we have just done – provides plenty of evidence for that last sentence among the global network of our branches and trees; and I am sure that the forests will continue to grow and prosper into the future, in ways that we don't yet know.

Appendix

Found here are some additional examples of recent Lasallian innovative educational programs, which are sub-divided into the five Regions of the international network of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.¹⁹

Note: Internet links retrieved in November 2020.

Lasallian Region of RELAN

- In the USA and Canada, there are non-traditional education centers (Catalyst Schools in Chicago, Illinois, and Tides Family Services in Rhode Island, for example), and places for transitional housing, retreat centers, and programs for young people with challenges.
- In the District of San Francisco New Orleans, there is a joint school in Tijuana, Mexico, that was founded to specifically serve the poor. Since 1982, this vocational and educational training center has taught more than 150 courses to young people and adults. All the teachers volunteer their time, and classes go from early morning through sessions lasting into the evening.
<http://www.lasalletijuana.com/quienes%20somos.htm>

Lasallian Region of RELEM

- In Spain, innovation is found in Lasallian ministries with street children, a publications house, and a sophisticated formation framework for high school and college teachers.
- France reaches out through career training and special educational programs. Particularly noteworthy was a multi-year program where children in gypsy communities were educated by way of a set of vans that followed the groups wherever they went.
- And the Brothers in Poland are known for working with developmentally challenged adults and young people.

Lasallian Region of RELAF

- Africa has established Rural Development Centers and Vocational Training Centers, and they serve children traumatized by wars and street children.
- There are centers for the professional formation of religious and teacher training colleges in Kenya and Egypt.

Lasallian Region of RELAL

- In Central and Latin America, we are engaged in teacher formation, with missionary volunteers, with street children, in vocation schools (baking, electricity, car repair, etc.), and in catechist formation.
- In the North Mexico highlands, there is an extensive religious education program – with buses that travel to outlying areas and mountain villages.
- Utopia Campus is an inspiring and amazing extension of La Salle University in Bogota, Colombia. It is located on the edge of the Amazon, and generates educational and career opportunities for rural young people with little economic resources who have been affected by violence, social exclusion, and the lack of education.
 - With the whole-hearted involvement of the university (visiting professors, programmatic organization, financial help, etc.) students become professionals in agricultural engineering and leaders capable of achieving practical, social, and political transformation for themselves and for their indigenous communities. It's a great example of Lasallian-driven, Lasallian-shaped educational innovation. <http://www.utopia.edu.co/Home/QueesUtopia> Utopia Video: <https://bit.ly/Utopia-English> Scott Gibbs – Inspiration (1998): <https://youtu.be/tRzsUF8CPao>

Lasallian Region of PARC

- In India and Sri Lanka, besides schools there are catechetical centers for youth and for adults, nutrition programs, and vocational education.
- And sometimes we do something for a while and then return later. In Australia, this past year we returned to Balgo Hills – an aboriginal community in the heart of the desert. We were initially there from 1984 to 2016, and we were recently invited back.
- Bahay Pag-asa in the Philippines is an outreach of the Lasallian universities, working with court-adjudicated youth in a rural setting near Bacolod, and another one right next to the campus of the university in Dasmariñas. <https://www.facebook.com/bahaypagasa/>

- La Salle Green Hills High School in Manila also has an Adult Night High School (ANHS). It was established in the mid-1970s and provides free, quality Lasallian education to the marginalized, offering academic scholarships and assisting the physically disabled through a Deaf Learners Program. Various vocational courses provide skills that enable them to earn a source of livelihood for themselves. Most students are from 19 to 65 years old. Classes are held at the High School building, from 5:00 to 9:00 p.m. after the regular students' classes. About a thousand students are involved in this night school program each year.
- Since 1961, Yourtown in Australia provides services for young people that help them access and find jobs, learn skills, become great parents and live safer, happier lives. They tackle issues impacting young people in Australia – such as mental health and unemployment. And they take on issues like family and domestic violence.
 - One of their more impressive ventures is Kids Helpline, which provides young people with free, private, confidential phone or webchat counseling at any time, about anything, for any reason. They receive an average of 6,000 calls a week. Check out their website if you want to see an impressive set of services. Yourtown: <https://www.yourtown.com.au/who-we-are> Kids Helpline: <https://kidshelpline.com.au/>
- In Vietnam, we find street kids, substance recovery, and motorcycle repair programs. Statistics say that Ho Chi Minh City has over 17,000 addicts; and among them, youth under 18 make up more almost 10%. During the past 11 years, the Lasallian Christian Brothers of Vietnam have operated the DUC MINH Vocational Center and have been successful in providing gratuitous learning and job skills to over 700 poor, wandering street children and handicapped youth.
 - <http://www.lasan.org/lasan-vietnam/fsc-school-after75/detoxification-project/project-2002.htm>
- Brother Victor Gil from Spain created a Bamboo School in Thailand near the Myanmar border that has now expanded to several schools, educating children from Myanmar who cross the border every day in order to attend classes there. <https://www.lasalleinternational.org/project/thailand-child-education/>
- The Brothers in Pakistan run a Catechists Training Center for Catholic men who want to become catechists. It is located in one of the few towns that is largely Catholic (Khushpur). They live with their families in very sparse habitats nearby, and their wives participate in cooking classes and the learning of similar practical skills. <https://www.lasallianfoundation.org/page.aspx?pid=343>
- In India, there are two independent communities caring for orphans (Boys Village and Boys Town). At each location, Brothers and volunteers provide classes in both practical and literacy skills to students from a wide variety of religious backgrounds. Each religious group holds its own prayer sessions in its own way. For Boys Village, see

http://lasalleindia.org/boys_village.php; and for Boys Town, see <http://lasalleindia.org/BThistory.php>

- We don't have time to highlight the work in India of Brother James Kimpton (1925-2017) in his "Reaching the Unreached" Community, one that matches HIV orphans with poor widows in a tight supportive community, and family-like housing, and where again it is practical and personal skills that have an opportunity to grow.

Endnotes

1. This text is an edited version of remarks delivered at the Huether Lasallian Conference that was held virtually from 19 to 21 November 2020. The theme of the Conference was "Great Things Are Possible: Our Lasallian Mission Reimagined and Renewed."

2. Brother George Van Grieken holds a PhD in religion and education from Boston College and currently serves as international secretary coordinator of Lasallian research and resources for the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

3. Cf. https://youtu.be/9_s7USV7gnA

4. *De La Salle: A City Saint and the Liberation of the Poor through Education* by Alfred Calcutt FSC (Oxford: De La Salle Publications, 1994), pages 414-142 (chapter 6).

5. Cf. *The Conduct of the Christian Schools* by John Baptist de Lasalle and translated by F. de La Fontainerie and Richard Arnandez FSC (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1996).

6. Meditation #197.1 in *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*, translated by Richard Arnandez FSC and Augustine Loes FSC (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1994).

7. "As only children of the poor who cannot pay any fees are accepted into these charity schools, they are taught free, without receiving anything from them, neither monthly nor annually, nor by way of a present or gratification nor under any pretext whatever. Even books, pens, paper, ink, etc., are provided for the neediest, that is, almost all." In Calcutt, page 341 (chapter 13).

8. Cf. "Memorandum on the Habit" in *Rule and Foundational Documents* by John Baptist de La Salle and translated and edited by Augustine Loes FSC and Ronald Isetti (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 2002), pages 181-191.

9. Calcutt, page 337 (chapter 13).

10. Just as in the Brothers' work for the oppressed working class and "the poor," there was the implication, whether in their primary schools or in their Sunday Academy that there was to be no upper limit set to their human and Christian development, so there was no refusal to meet the

educational needs of a broad growing commercial class whose Christian needs could be met only by meeting their social needs. Cf. Calcutt, page 423 (chapter 15).

11. For background and further context, see: *Lasallian Studies #6: An Introduction to the History of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, 18th Century (1726-1804)* by Henri Bedel FSC and translated by Allen Geppert FSC (Rome, 1998).

12. For background and further context, see: *Lasallian Studies #9: An Introduction to the History of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, 19th Century (1805-1875)* by Henri Bedel FSC and translated by Aidan Marron FSC (Rome, 2006) & *Lasallian Studies #11: An Introduction to the History of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, 19th-20th Centuries (1875-1928)* by Henri Bedel FSC and translated by Allen Geppert FSC (Rome, 1998).

13. For background and further context, see: *Lasallian Studies #11: An Introduction to the History of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, 19th-20th Centuries (1875-1928)* by Henri Bedel FSC and translated by Allen Geppert FSC (Rome, 1998) & *Lasallian Studies #12: An Introduction to the History of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, 20th Century (1928-1946)* by Henri Bedel FSC and translated by Allen Geppert FSC (Rome, 2008).

14. 1,083 schools; 1,012,000 students; 93,000 educators (57% women); and 1,600 Brothers working in the ministries.

15. “Introduction” by Nicolas Capelle FSC in *Bulletin of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools #248: Lasallian Educational Innovation* (Rome, 2003), page 11.

16. Examples are the stories behind the Catalyst Schools in Chicago, IL, and the De Marillac Academy in San Francisco, CA.

17. “Introduction” by Nicolas Capelle FSC, page 8.

18. “Introduction” by Nicolas Capelle FSC, page 14.

19. The five Regions of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools are: RELAN (Lasallian Region of North America), RELEM (Lasallian Region of Europe & Mediterranean), RELAF (Lasallian Region of Africa), RELAL (Lasallian Region of Latin America), AND PARC (Lasallian Region of Pacific Asia). The acronyms for the Regions, in most cases, represent the French names of the Regions.