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## The Nature of Lasallian Leadership

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Look and listen to the world as it emerges around us. What do those around us, those we serve, need? We might consider the question, *what is being asked of us?* As we consider the sisterhood and brotherhood of our Lasallian community, that question remains consistent over time and context. The world is much different today than at the time of the founding of the Institute. The need for leadership for our marginalized common humanity remains the same.

Take a moment to consider the nine thoughts / quotations presented below – possibly through *lectio divina* – as you contemplate what is being asked of you on your Lasallian journey. *What are you being asked to do ... really?*

- “Your vocation in life is where your greatest joy meets the world’s greatest need.”<sup>3</sup>
- “Vocation, at its deepest level, is something you cannot not do.”<sup>4</sup>
- “Let us be the ancestors our descendants will thank.”<sup>5</sup>
- “Who do you choose to be for this time? Are you willing to use whatever power and influence you have to create *islands of sanity* that evoke and rely on our best human qualities to create, relate, and persevere? Will you consciously and bravely choose to reclaim leadership as a noble profession, one that creates possibility and humaneness in the midst of increasing fear and turmoil?”<sup>6</sup>
- “The servant-leader *is* servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead.”<sup>7</sup>
- “All that you touch You Change. All that you Change Changes you. The only lasting truth is Change. God is Change.”<sup>8</sup>
- “Maybe love is like rain. Sometimes gentle, sometimes torrential, flooding, eroding, joyful, steady, filling the earth, collecting in underground springs. When it rains, when we love, life grows.”<sup>9</sup>
- “We try to make a rose into a good rose, rather than seek to change roses into lilies ... It necessitates a pleasure in the self-actualization of a person who may be quite different from yourself. It even implies an ultimate respect and acknowledgement of the sacredness and uniqueness of each kind of person.”<sup>10</sup>
- “Commencement speakers are always telling young people to follow their passions. Be true to yourself. This is a vision of life that begins with self and ends with self. But people on the road to inner light do not find their vocations by asking, what do I want from life? They ask, what is life asking of me? How can I match my intrinsic talent with one of the world’s deep needs?”<sup>11</sup>

Possibly, in reflecting on the above quotations, you experienced a reminder of the teacher or servant or leader you intended to be when your journey began. You are invited to continue to ponder, in your sacred interior Self, the nature of Lasallian leadership in your life and in the lives of those entrusted to your care.

God who guides all things with wisdom and gentleness and who is not accustomed to forcing the inclination of persons, wanting to engage me fully in the care of the schools, did so in an imperceptible manner and over a period of time so that one commitment led me to another, without my foreseeing this at the beginning.<sup>12</sup>

The above frequently quoted reflection from John Baptist de La Salle opens doors of insight into the founding story of a worldwide movement, De La Salle's educational vision, and De La Salle's spiritual vision. The humility and humanity of these thoughts have resonated with Brothers and Lasallians over centuries. The central devotion to the *care of the schools* may limit our imagination to contemporary conceptions of schooling and efficiencies. Our Lasallian Institute has expanded its influence and reach to many ministries beyond the first original schools. The insights on leadership from contemporary thinkers – subsequent to De La Salle's insight into our journey – open new doors to the context and nuance of what calls us in our time.

The same zeal, the same passion, the same love of the origins, continues today to inspire many young people and adults who find the Lasallian mission attractive, as it is currently much richer, more pluralistic and participatory.<sup>13</sup>

We might look at this another way. That if education is about wholeness, if the Latin root *educere* means to “draw out from within” or to “lead forth,” this central quotation from the Founder may indeed be about leadership. De La Salle penned these words in a repressing, politicized, and sometimes dehumanizing cultural context. This is a call to a new kind of leadership. Leadership characterized by faith and zeal, rooted in a deep commitment to human wholeness. A leadership infused with wisdom, gentleness, and commitment to seeing each individual person through the lens of their birthright connection to divinity – to encounter each person as a child of God. Because De La Salle's God “is not accustomed to forcing the inclination of persons” and “God is the teacher that he and his companions would envision,”<sup>14</sup> we must choose this leadership, be called to this leadership, commit to this leadership.

As I look at the treasure that Saint John Baptist de La Salle and his first companions have left us, I see a richness grounded in the God who calls, who acts and who accompanies. I see a new age for our Lasallian Family as we learn to broaden Saint John Baptist de La Salle's insights to encompass men and women across the world of many continents and religious persuasions to grab hold of this common heritage: a provident God at work in the fabric of reality. A God whose heart-of-hearts has been conquered by the needs of young people who hunger with a hunger they cannot always articulate: a hunger for salvation, for “*salus*,” for wholeness. A God who challenges distinctions, separations, and excuses. A God who calls for an uncompromised wholeness. This is our Lasallian Spirituality. This is our call to action and association.<sup>15</sup>

## **Lasallian Leadership Defined**

Lasallian pedagogy, Lasallian spirituality, and Lasallian association are all nodes in our conceptual understanding of our shared work in mission. The complexities of the world emerging in our contemporary experience invites us to define Lasallian leadership – that force which the world

needs in our time. The field and discipline of leadership offers rich soil for the planting of our legacy, our shared calling in the mission of the Lasallian journey.<sup>16</sup>

Peter Northouse, a prominent scholar in the field of leadership, proposes:

Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal.<sup>17</sup>

We might start with that definition and then add modifiers and descriptors to make a more nuanced definition of Lasallian leadership. For instance, Northouse's exploration of leadership often refers to those that follow leaders as *followers* or *subordinates*, as do many leadership scholars. Given the Lasallian lens of the inner light of each human being and our devotion to "*all means all*" when it comes to inclusion of those on the margins, Lasallian leadership can offer more nuanced language to the relationship between the person practicing leadership, or leading learning, and the receiver of their good work, teaching, energy, and even wisdom. If we walk with one another, lead along, and draw out from within in community, we might more clearly refer to those entrusted to our leadership as *companions*. Accompaniment on the shared journey, then, is characterized by a community of companions.

Let us start at a different place. Let us build our own meaning of Lasallian leadership together. Rooted in *faith and zeal*, we can start with another definition, proposed here, and then add to it in a way that honors our shared ministry in mission. If leadership is a form of energy that we direct to humanize systems, structures, processes, and organizations, then Lasallian leadership is characterized by profound interiority, devoted commitment to serving others through purposeful community, and a deep and abiding spirituality rooted in faith in a loving God. Because teaching and learning lead to human wholeness – a life lived to the full – they are necessary components of Lasallian leadership.

### **Drawing on Our Lasallian Lexicon**

This exploration of the nature of Lasallian leadership is not intended to be definitive or comprehensive. It is intended to continue a conversation about where the Lasallian mission is leading us. Some of the nuance of this open dialogue can be explored in the language that roots and defines our common understanding of the emerging growth of the Lasallian Institute. In many Lasallian circles, we use conceptual bundles to convey a shared deeper meaning. Some examples of our shared language rooted in Lasallian culture: *together and by association, serving those entrusted to our care, a spirit of faith, fraternity, and zeal*. We also convey meaning when we contemplate the virtues of a good teacher (and here, we might add, *leader*). Our engagements with one another might also be reflected in Lasallian Core principles of *faith in the presence of God, concern for the poor and social justice, respect for all persons, quality education, and inclusive community*. Once again, these are rooted in both the wonder of the founding of the Institute and in the evolutionary sense of purpose that is the Lasallian movement. Taken in part, or as a whole, this shared language is a language of leadership that may help us discern our way forward in our individual, community, and contemporary journey of responding to the needs of others. Below are a few reflective connections between our Lasallian lexicon and the holistic leadership that is needed in a fragmented world.

## ***Accompaniment***

Holding the newly born in one's arms nourishes the bond that is accompaniment. Regardless of the age or characteristics of those entrusted to our care, each one was a child once. We must remember that if we are to accompany others with the quality of love that is the central teaching of our faith or spiritual tradition. That is the unbreakable bond of our common humanity. To lead others along through accompaniment characterizes an essential element of Lasallian leadership. There is an abiding presence that both guides us and calls for our practice of it. To be fully present for others as we lead, to be with others without distraction – this is our birthright in community.

Our practice of accompaniment is grounded in faith, fraternity and zeal, a passion for life and love. What do we wish for others? What do we see in them? Can we see the God-given potential that even those entrusted to us cannot see in themselves? How shall we walk with them in a way that unlocks potential and develops capacity? Will they know that this practice of our distinctive Lasallian form of leadership is who we are? What if everything we do matters? How will we act out our heritage then?

The values of the Lasallian tradition find the possibility of being updated in the pedagogy of accompaniment. This pedagogy reaffirms the possibility of each one, the ability to find one's own journey and the necessary freedom to walk with responsible autonomy. If the pedagogy of fraternity makes us brothers and sisters among all, it also makes the educator the older brother and sister of the students. It is a relationship that privileges “*going with,*” and “*next to (alongside)*” in autonomy and ongoing care. It is the power of the educational relationship of our Lasallian heritage.<sup>18</sup>

Embedded in the loving relationship of striving for the best for others is less a state of doing and more a state of being. If you have held the beloved miracle that is a newly born infant in your arms and let go of all your own concerns, you have experienced the kind of accompaniment that Lasallian leadership offers to all of those served. And for Lasallians, “*all means all.*”

## ***Together and by Association***

If we are blessed to live well, there are times when something deep within us leads to actions that serve others and satisfy our souls. Our sense of purpose aligns with addressing the needs of those entrusted to our care. This call – that which we cannot not do – comes before we choose to lead the way. As Robert K. Greenleaf noted, “It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first.*”<sup>19</sup> As Lasallian leaders, we often find ourselves surrounded with others of vastly different experiences and beliefs, but of a like mind when it comes to the power of human relationship in seeking the mutuality of growth, development, and learning. Our subconscious call becomes a set of conscious choices to gather with others around a particular set of aims. We come together and see those on the margins with new eyes – seeing from many perspectives but with a shared loving intention to lift others into fullness and wholeness while honoring their own will and life experiences with grace. Lasallian leadership is a leadership of and with community as a form of energy.

Lasallian spirituality is oriented toward community. It is lived in the spirit of faith and zeal together in communion for mission, or better said, in “association” for the educational service of the poor. Lasallian spirituality today cannot be lived or understood without reference to “together and by association.”<sup>20</sup>

The community educates, strengthens its members, cares for the weak and nurtures their spirit. It is the best guarantee to respond to the greatest imaginable challenges. To be Lasallian, by definition, is *to belong to a community* and to commit oneself within that same community to a common task.<sup>21</sup>

How do we arrive together from such different ecosystems of life experience, geography, identity, and traditions? How is it that we change together, willingly, associating for shared mission? To transform the lives of those entrusted to our care, we commit to forming one another and with one another. We sink our roots into the fertile soil of our common heritage while preserving the uniqueness of our individual identities.

Lasallian formation for mission takes place in the context of community. Each person’s experience of the pilgrimage is unique, requiring individual accompaniment and formation. Lasallian formation is based on mutual learning and accompaniment. In this way the Lasallian community is “the context, the recipient, and the agent” of formation and can be referred to as a formative community.<sup>22</sup>

Lasallian leadership is characterized by deep reverence for the unique identity of each person solidified by the loving network of relationship that is authentic community. Purpose and potential align in the action and being of leadership that connects, uplifts, and honors our common humanity. Lasallian leadership is not an individual accomplishment or set of characteristics; it is practiced, together and by association, in and for a loving community. It is a place, space, and energy where everyone belongs because they are human.

### ***Entrusted to Our Care***

De La Salle’s life and experience have provided rich examples of how we might proceed in a complicated world. The context of the social, cultural, political, and religious upheaval of De La Salle’s times made more complex the challenge of his calling and legacy. We find ourselves in similarly complex times that also call for a different kind of leadership, one rooted in devotion to transforming lives for the wholeness of individuals and for social harmony. Margaret Wheatley labels our current context as a “*VUCA World*, defined by the US military as Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous”<sup>23</sup> – not unlike the times in which De La Salle and the first De La Salle Christian Brothers lived and worked.

One element of De La Salle’s life story, the story that has become part of our shared heritage, involves a gradual process of seeing a new reality in this complex world. One reading of his life might be that, at one time, he did not see some of God’s children and, then through God’s wisdom and gentleness, De La Salle’s eyes were imperceptibly opened to their needs, promise, and structural exclusion from hope, faith, and love. At one time, De La Salle did not see the children

of the artisans and the poor as people in need of salvation and then, through divine inspiration, that is almost all that De La Salle could see.

I know it is possible for leaders to use their power and influence, their insight and compassion, to lead people back to an understanding of who we are as human beings, to create the conditions for our basic human qualities of generosity, contribution, community, and love to be evoked no matter what. I know it is possible to experience grace and joy in the midst of tragedy and loss. I know it is possible to create islands of sanity in the midst of wildly disruptive seas. I know it is possible because I have worked with leaders over many years in places that knew chaos and breakdown long before this moment. These extraordinary leaders, with great effort, dedication and personal sacrifice, created islands of sanity where good work still got done and where people enjoyed healthy relationships in the midst of chaotic conditions, fierce opposition, heart-breaking defeats, lack of support, isolation, loneliness, and slander.<sup>24</sup>

Lasallian leadership beckons us to see the unseen, see the marginalized, and even see ourselves with new eyes. This seeing of deep human potential, seeing the divine in those that have been historically and contemporarily excluded, reveals a partnership of change. We must open our eyes, and that loving force of the universe must help us to see the world in a new light – to see the unseen, the excluded, and outcast with loving affection as the very reason for our shared mission. Who are those that our *VUCA World* denies the fullness of our common humanity? They are the inheritors of the rising phoenix that is Lasallian leadership. They are the members of our human community that need to be re-membered. These are the ones entrusted to our care.

### ***Radical Inclusivity: “All Means All”***

Lasallian leadership is radical. *Radical*, here, refers to *rooted*. Deeply. Faithfully. Passionately. Rooted. Those entrusted to our care draw on the deep roots of our reverence for the sacred nature of our individual and common humanity, our potential, our connection to the divine force of love of the universe. To lead others along and to draw out the sacred within is our shared bond in mission to work together and by association for those entrusted to our care. We do not choose them; they are entrusted to us, the heavenly parent handing the newborn infant to us with trust and expectation. We often find ourselves living in times of fragmentation, disconnection, and separation. We all want and need to belong. Our humanity is mired in spiritual crises, and we need to be led out by one another.

The spiritual crisis manifests itself fundamentally in the loss of the meaning of life and in religiosities inconsistent with the defense of what is profoundly human and without real expressions of mercy and responsibility in relationships with others. This reality should lead us to work hard so that social networks create human networks. The loneliness full of noises, the adolescent’s life with bubbles of virtual worlds, absolute dependencies and loss of freedom in the world of new technologies are undermining interpersonal relationships and the deep communication of being and meaning. The Lasallian ethic is relational. It is, therefore, an expression of the most genuine Gospel values and of all the most venerable religious traditions. These values include loving one’s neighbor as oneself, forgiving, accompanying, and expressing in mercy the presence of God who is love.<sup>25</sup>

“The Lasallian Family remains committed to making Lasallian education accessible for all regardless of faith, or social and economic status.”<sup>26</sup> Lasallian leadership works for community, belonging, inclusivity, dignity, relationship, and the common bond of love. Lasallian leadership must work actively against exclusion, disconnection, separations, hatred, apathy, and the whole host of *-isms* that prevent the wholeness of our individual and common humanity. We must look to those experiencing disconnection on the margins and embrace their lives as part of ours, connected to ours, and sharing the same destiny as ours. We are called to lead others along in a particular way, to draw out the divine humanity in each person we touch with a leadership that transforms lives – ours included.

### ***Interiority: The Reflective Inner Life***

Lasallian leadership is characterized by a deep interiority, an abundant quiet backroom of the mind and soul. Our interior life is the scaffold for the doing and being that is Lasallian leadership. The commitments that De La Salle lived became more filled with meaning through his reflection and contemplation. The interior of the Lasallian leader binds the worlds of the inner life and expression of life in the world and with others. The beautifully appointed home from the outside is one thing; the life lived by those inside the home is the deeper reality. Our life, leadership, and legacy are amplified by the richness of our inner life work, our contemplation, our discernment, and the quality of our reflection.

Lasallian leadership asks us to draw from our inner depth and wisdom, and also teach and lead from and for this shared transformation. The challenges of our *VUCA World* might, in this way, be more effectively met with wisdom, serenity, and the power of deep love.

We face the urgent need to educate for contemplation, interiority and depth. In short, today more than ever it is important to form people’s criteria, help them develop their capacity for analysis and critical thinking, turn their doubts into a search engine. Essential learning consists of knowing how to digest, through contemplation, reflection and silence, the abundant information ingested, using it to understand the world and its relationships, by communicating with others by expressing one’s own thoughts reasonably and calmly. Education must be patient and unrushed.<sup>27</sup>

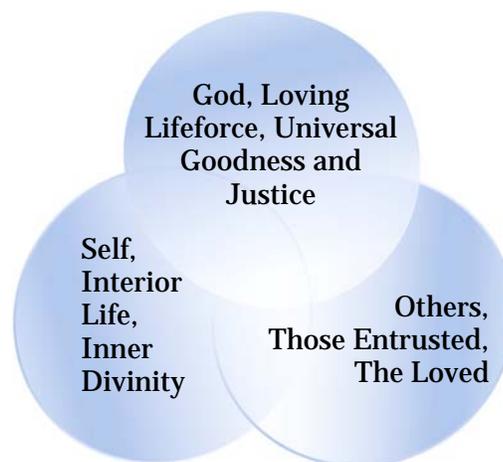
The quality of our life, the lives of those entrusted to our care, our shared experience, and the wholeness of our common humanity is rooted in the quality of the inner life of each member of our community. We must look within, look to the margins, look at who is here with us and lead the way with the faith and zeal of our Lasallian leadership.

### **Considering a Lasallian Leadership Model**

The framework posed below is an integration of our emerging Lasallian identity and the call for Lasallian leadership that supports our continued development in pedagogy/ andragogy, service, and formation. The *conceptual sphere of self* might be rooted in an historical connection to De La Salle’s “Rules I Have Imposed on Myself,” Lasallian interiority or “Method of Interior Prayer” (or meditation), and “Meditations for the Time of Retreat” (including a retreat into self and an aloneness with one’s God or spiritual connections).

The *conceptual sphere of others* might be rooted in asking others to trust in providence, examining privilege, changing, questioning positional power, De La Salle's desire to not lead the Brothers as a priest, the sentiment *we are all in this together*, egalitarianism, flat organizational structures, shared leadership, mild hierarchies, commitment to those entrusted to our care, radical inclusion, looking to the margins, seeing others anew, Lasallian spirituality (open, inclusive, innovative), accompaniment, companions as those being led, and a transcendent worldview.

The *conceptual sphere of God* might be rooted in faith and zeal, an individual's relationship with their creator or loving force, religious and/ or spiritual commitments, and the unbreakable bond of universal love that unites our common humanity. De La Salle's biographers tell us that his final words were, "Yes, I adore in all things, the conduct of God in my regard!" We are left with a powerful message to inform our practice of Lasallian leadership in the all-encompassing nature of this relationship with the God that guides each of us and all of us, in a way that is radically inclusive of our religious and spiritual belief systems.



## **Sending Forth**

This manuscript is intended to ground a theory of Lasallian leadership while also continuing an ongoing dialogue on the nature of Lasallian leadership as it responds to changing circumstances, emergent needs, and rising challenges to the wholeness of our common humanity. The ideas expressed here are intended to fuel conversation in our community in a way that nourishes and edifies our individual and collective inquiry, imagination, and curiosity in a world in need of our Lasallian responsiveness.

The reflective practice of Lasallian leadership is a way of thinking, doing, and being. Lasallian leadership is a positive response to the question, *What if everything we do and think matters?* It is the practice of virtue for the sake of others. It is love in actions devoted to those entrusted to our care. Lasallian leadership is radically inclusive, a force of re-membering our common humanity, and experienced in relationship and community. It is the bridge between the richness of our inner

life potential and that which we have been called to do and invited to be. It is rooted in tradition, but free from the incompleteness of the past; founded in devoted religiosity, but free from the confines of blind obedience; inspired by our divine connection to one another and fueled by the unique individuality that each person represents and is.

We enact Lasallian leadership with our companions, those entrusted to our care, together and by association. Lasallian leadership is a form of energy that we direct to humanize systems, structures, processes, and organizations characterized by profound interiority, devoted commitment to serving others through purposeful community, and a deep and abiding spirituality rooted in faith in a loving God.

What is being asked of us? Our dear Lasallian companions all ... go forward ... lead the way.

## Endnotes

1. Acknowledgment by the author: “This manuscript would not have come to be without my Lasallian companions. There are too many individuals to name without the concern of missing a person who has accompanied me on my journey. You know who you are, Brothers, Lasallians, companions, colleagues, students, and all of those that have been entrusted to my care (who I gratefully acknowledge have been leaders in my life). I have been entrusted to the care of each of you. Thank you.”
2. Scott Sorvaag, who earned his doctorate in leadership at Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota, is presently a professor of education at Saint Mary’s. He is a graduate of the Buttimer Institute of Lasallian Studies and, more recently, facilitated sessions on Lasallian pedagogy at the Johnston Institute of Contemporary Lasallian Practice.
3. Frederick Buechner (born 1928).
4. Parker Palmer (born 1939).
5. Winona LaDuke (born 1959).
6. Margaret Wheatley, *Who Do We Choose to Be? An Invitation to the Nobility of Leadership* (University of Pittsburgh: Leader to Leader, Summer 2017).
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8. Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Talents* (Open Talk Media, 2012), page 7.
9. Carol Gilligan (born 1938)
10. Abraham Maslow (1908-1970).
11. David Brooks, “The Moral Bucket List” in *New York Times*, April 11, 2015.

12. From the “Memoir on the Beginnings” in *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle* (Book One) by Jean-Baptiste Blain (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 2000), page 80.
13. *Declaration on the Lasallian Educational Mission: Challenges, Convictions and Hopes* by Brothers of the Christian Schools (Rome, 2020), page 46.
14. Jeffrey Calligan FSC, “Lasallian Spirituality” in *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 5, no. 3 (2014), page 52.
15. Calligan, page 55.
16. Cf. *Lasallian Formation for Mission: The Pilgrim’s Handbook* by Brothers of the Christian Schools (Rome, 2019).
17. Peter G. Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, 7<sup>th</sup> edition (Sage: Thousand Oaks, 2019).
18. *Declaration on the Lasallian Educational Mission*, page 108.
19. Robert K. Greenleaf, page 6.
20. *A Conversation for the Lasallian Family: Deepening Our Identity* by the International Council for Lasallian Association and the Educational Mission (Rome, 2020), page 24.
21. *Declaration on the Lasallian Educational Mission*, page 65.
22. *A Conversation for the Lasallian Family*, page 24.
23. Margaret Wheatley, *Who Do We Choose to Be? An Invitation to the Nobility of Leadership* (University of Pittsburgh: Leader to Leader, Summer 2017), page 37.
24. Wheatley, page 38.
25. *Declaration on the Lasallian Educational Mission*, pages 98-99.
26. *A Conversation for the Lasallian Family*, page 20.
27. *Declaration on the Lasallian Educational Mission*, page 97.