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## ANNOTATION

Giovanni FSC, Gabriele di. *Dio è davvero buono* [*God Is So Good: The Life Journey and Ministry of Saint John Baptist de La Salle*]. Rome: Lasallian District of Italy, 2019.

Ever since the General Chapter of 1956, the Institute has increasingly supported and developed Lasallian scholarship on many levels, not only by making historical documents and significant research results more generally available via the *Cahiers lasalliens*, but also by encouraging more scholars, Brothers and others, to engage the rich heritage of our charism through an analysis of its sources and a vigorous consideration of its dynamic relevance today. The ongoing publication of the *Cahiers* – currently at volume 67 – and the various ways that scholarship continues to develop both at international and District levels are a testament to the fact that the roots of our vocational impetus remain life-giving resources for both the present and the future. The Institute has sponsored, and continues to sponsor, international gatherings of scholars who together investigate, explore, discuss, and share with the larger Lasallian world their insights into specific aspects of Lasallian history, pedagogy, and spirituality. The International Symposium on Lasallian Research at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota gathers scholars from around the world to address specific topics and share their findings among others who are drawn by the priorities of the Lasallian educational heritage. And a large number of Lasallian colleges and universities have introduced internal symposia that allow younger scholars to share their research with colleagues and others, inviting them to examine specific topics or questions from the perspective of our shared Lasallian charism and ministry. Journals such as *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* in the USA, along with *Sussidi per la catechesis* and *Revista Lasalliana* in other countries such as Italy, provide avenues for making scholarship more widely available to audiences that include both interested Lasallians and outside scholars who may never have heard about our educational heritage and rich spirituality.

This work is a welcome addition to this wider body of knowledge and reflection. It is too often the case that new or budding scholars who are first exposed to the richness of the Lasallian tradition tend to seize upon one or other isolated aspect, priority, or principle of this heritage, applying it to their area of interest with an enthusiasm that reveals more about themselves than it does about the tradition itself. While this is not a fatal myopia, such bursts of singular application tend to obscure wider patterns of integration that are made possible through a deeper understanding and reading of the Lasallian texts and the writings of past Lasallian scholars. *Dio è davvero buono* is welcome precisely because it does exactly this: i.e., it provides an exposure to key Lasallian texts, integrated with an interpretation and application that is based on wide experience, deep scholarship, and true pedagogical sensitivity.

As an educational Institute, one that is essentially made up of educators working in schools, there is a real sense of satisfaction in reading a scholarly work that thoughtfully considers and pedagogically engages the reader of that work. It is as if each chapter and each section were part of a detailed lesson-plan for a group of interested, or perhaps initially marginally interested,

students. The text reads more like a conversation or personal presentation than a scholarly delivery for other scholars. Yet the content is very well researched, organized, and presented. Reading it reminded me of a series of lectures that I attended many years ago by scripture scholar Raymond Brown, SS, on the Gospel of John, where each morning he would simply sit on a stool on a theater stage and speak for two hours without notes, intriguing and fascinating the class with his knowledge and ease of delivery. The present work is similar in that the content of its scholarship is deep and certain, and the flow of its themes is smooth and consistent.

John Baptist de La Salle's guidance and influence – via his life and his writings and his personal presence – are as important today as they were during his lifetime, perhaps more so. The author of this work, Brother Gabriele Di Giovanni, FSC, describes the impetus of his work well when he writes in his introduction about his work as “an opportunity to try and regain contact with the original experience from which the movement was born and of which we are and feel a part. It is an opportunity to try to revive in us that experience in today's changed context” (8). This is all the more important these days, when that context is experiencing a radical shift of educational culture because of the rise of technology, the different modalities for accessing information, and the recently increased concerns about health safety and social distancing. John Baptist de La Salle was not unfamiliar with the juggling of priorities or the introduction of new teaching modalities. A work such as this one helps readers walk with and understand his decisions and actions, especially during times of family, personal, professional, and societal crises.

It is admirable that the author decided to look at the journey of John Baptist de La Salle by way of two primary and indisputable sources of information. The examined and referenced texts are exclusively primary documents by the Founder – directly or indirectly – along with those from individuals who knew De La Salle personally. And the recorded events of De La Salle's life are clustered according to themes or personal crises, which are decision points when De La Salle had to make major decisions about himself and others. By examining these decision points, the author provides us also with a fine method of discernment. And while it may not equal more delineated discernment methodologies developed by other major saints – Saint Ignatius of Loyola comes to mind – here nevertheless are insights about how De La Salle proceeded in resolving the crises that were a consistent part of his life journey.

The first chapter of the book (12-19) appropriately provides an historical context for De La Salle's life. Here, part of the author's approach begins to be evident. Key historical milestones are succinctly listed. A helpful chart helps the reader to understand the social context of the time. And the religious context is concisely presented through significant factors, contemporaneous saints, and helpful summaries. Unlike authors who insist on including a plethora of facts and figures – with often little relevance to the subject at hand – this one thinks more like a good educator, as if thinking “What does the reader need to know in order appreciate what is coming later in the book?” By the time the second chapter of the book (20-35) appears, with its consideration of the first biography of De La Salle, we are prepared to understand how what they wrote might have been influenced, sometimes significantly, by the religious context and priorities of the time. Because of the significance of the biography by Canon Blain, his text deserves greater consideration than the others. And helpfully, a large selection of Blain's biography is quoted, followed by the author's commentary, so that the reader might step into the kind of world that is Blain's own. In a phrase near the end of that section, the author, after some observations and questions, illustrates for me

his approach in writing this work when he writes: “Let’s leave the judgment to the willing reader” (34).

The line of interpretation that is subsequently used to look at the life of De La Salle is chosen to facilitate the making of connections between his life and our own, since “Re-reading De La Salle’s life implies a re-reading of our own life” (39). There are four stages identified in looking at De La Salle’s life, each with its own set of events, circumstances, individuals, and decision points which lead to turning points. Because any single life is tremendously complex, some help is needed to help us understand some of the personal dynamics within those stages. For that purpose, contemporary insights from developmental specialists are brought into play. As the author explains, “In everyone’s life there are ‘passages’: these are the moments in which decisions are taken that will orient the future path and, in a certain sense, decided it” (40). And so three methodological contributions to this re-reading of De La Salle’s life are introduced. They are the stages of life described by Eric Erikson, the stages of faith described by James Fowler, and an intentional focus on the significant points of crisis in De La Salle’s life journey. The only textual references for these stages are the documents we have that directly relate to each: i.e., the *Memoir on the Beginnings*, the *Memoir on the Habit*, the *Rules I Have Imposed on Myself*, and the *Letter of April 1714*, each of them considered and provided in their entirety. As the author writes in a summary statement, “It is not a life of De La Salle in the strict sense of the word, but rather an interpretation of De La Salle’s life starting from certain vital moments, the crises, read through some autobiographical documents crossed with the knowledge that comes to us from the human sciences” (45). From this description of his approach, the author reveals an educator’s disposition backed up by an engaging lesson plan.

In the subsequent chapters, each stage of De La Salle life is provided in a way that neither taxes one’s attention nor insults one’s intelligence. What is particularly helpful is the brief and rich list of recorded facts, events, or specific situations in De La Salle’s life that help define each stage and provide the foundation for the author’s consideration of that stage. Such succinct lists provide the cluster of facts, circumstances, choices, and historical facts that shape the scope and possible directions De La Salle’s life might take. Then with a more contemporary eye, particular trends or movements may be noticed or pointed out. For example, in his youth and up to the age of 35, De La Salle’s progressive assumption of intimacy and the development of relationships and friendships comes to the fore, and the crises surrounding his vocation to the priesthood and growing involvement with the teachers are key touch-points. The *Memoir on the Beginnings* is looked at within the context of De La Salle’s personal experiences during that time, followed by some acute, focused insights into how he reacted and responded to the circumstances in which he found himself at specific points along the way. And as a result, we can fully appreciate and agree with the author’s important observation that in that particular document, “The tone is calm and sincere. De La Salle does not hide his feelings, even when they are negative. In some passages De La Salle speaks to himself, in a kind of examination of conscience carried out aloud” (55). This is then followed by a brief analysis of key passages, ones that show how he was led to make decisions, with the section closing with the invitation, “We leave any further comments to the reader” (56).

The rest of the chapters that deal with the life of De La Salle are approached with the same care and similar content. There is introductory material – the 40-to-65-years-old period, for example,

starting with a consideration of what is meant by maturity – after which biographical data of his life is presented in an extensive list of years that each present one fact, circumstance, or personal challenge. Key texts of the period are then presented in their entirety and considered in the context of their histories, and insightful comments help the reader consider both the history and texts from a perspective of coming to understand aspects of De La Salle’s life that may readily be applied to our own. The author lays out the facts, makes observations, and then invites the reader to add their own, answering the question, “What image of De La Salle emerges from these texts?” (80).

The last historical period, De La Salle’s “Old Age” (81-100), is particularly rich, because not only has the reader become much more familiar with this singular life journey; but there is also a deep awareness of the challenges that De La Salle faced, addressed, and moved beyond. Whenever possible, the author helps the reader to better understand terms that deserve more attention. For example, since the term “dark night of the soul” has frequently been applied to some of De La Salle’s circumstances during this time period near the end of his life, the author gives a very helpful perspective on how that phrase was understood and experienced by Saint John of the Cross. And a careful overview into more contemporary understandings of “old age” and its unique challenges helps the reader appreciate what it meant for De La Salle to respond to the 1714 letter from the Brothers in Paris in the way that he evidently did: “Here I am. What do you want me to do?”

At the conclusion of his review of De La Salle’s life journey, the author summarizes the relevance of this endeavor like a good teacher who helps students understand the purpose of the lesson: “His itinerary obliges us to come to terms with our own, not so much to take stock . . . , but to become aware that we too are part of a great plan of God’s to carry out together with our brothers and sisters. In spite of the difficulties that we may encounter to varying degrees and which the Lasallian world, as we have seen, has never lacked, De La Salle today is more alive than ever and has our hands and our feet: it would be exceptional if it also had our spirit” (101).

Based on these chapters of historical foundation and analysis, the next sections – very important and foundational in their own right – bring the story into today’s times by looking at Lasallian spirituality, pedagogical vision, and catechetical perspective. These three aspects “are related, they refer to each other: and this can be understood as a typical characteristic of the Lasallian perspective that does not distinguish between the duties of one’s state and those relative to one’s own salvation” (101). These are “three poles” of how Lasallian spirituality is almost viscerally attached to the real experience of education. “Education is a way of being, and a way of being as Christians” (102). And “For Lasallians, living education is their way to holiness” (106). A deeper understanding of how this is true is provided by wonderfully delving into the concept of spirituality today, a contextualization of Lasallian identity within its own time, some helpful general features of Lasallian spirituality, and a deeper look at specific important aspects of that spirituality.

Throughout this chapter and others, there is a feature that is innovative and helpful – clearly again from the teacher’s instinct – consisting of charts that clearly compare aspects of Lasallian realities with standards drawn from other sources. These additional components both support the main arguments and provide a resource for the reader’s personal engagement and reflection.

In the section on seventeenth-century French spirituality (109-115), each of the primary figures is succinctly introduced in a systematic way, so that by the end of the section the reader has a much

better understanding of De La Salle's historical context, which facilitates a deeper appreciation of his writings. Such inclusions are often either too brief or too detailed. In this case, the author wisely maintains the teacher's approach; i.e., provide enough information to engage the reader and sufficient material to move the narrative forward. This methodology is employed throughout the book.

It would not be surprising to learn that "The thesis on these pages is that there is a Lasallian school of spirituality that has its own characteristics that distinguish it from other similar schools" (115). But what is refreshing and welcome is the fact that this statement is followed by a thorough, systematic, and easily read exposition of how and why this is true. Based on the principles found in Raymond Deville's 1987 classic on the French school of spirituality, each is shown to be present and unique in the case of De La Salle and Lasallian spirituality. The section on specific doctrinal positions in De La Salle's writings is a unique compilation by itself, illustrating the unique points of doctrine that are found therein. It will not come as a surprise to those familiar with De La Salle writings that Christocentrism is a major feature of his spirituality. The author not only demonstrates this through well-researched sections about De La Salle's notions of Christ and the Lasallian emphases connected with the French School of Spirituality, but there is also a multi-stage description of the process of identification with Christ according to De La Salle. While an entire summary of this section cannot be provided here, the last section on De La Salle as a master of hope gives a contemporary slant on the possible contribution of Lasallian spirituality to educators of today.

When it comes to De La Salle's pedagogy, after clearing the air about the differences between his time and our time today, there is a fine contemporary description of what is essential when it comes to a "Lasallian" notion of education: "Above all, De La Salle is one who believes in education as an instrument of human elevation and transformation in Christ: in his language . . . education is an instrument of salvation . . . He was a brilliant and creative innovator in the vision of the school, in the perception of the teacher, and in teaching methodologies" (155). The chapter includes interesting sections such as the "perception of ignorance in De La Salle's time," and the Lasallian response to it. There are sections that look at all of the granular organizational aspects of teachers and teachings, including a detailed look at a typical school's day. The various ways that prayer was incorporated in a school day is illustrated by sharing some of the actual prayer texts, which by themselves provide an intuitive insight about the religious priorities of the time. As expected, the chapter ends with what all this means for Lasallian pedagogy today. This is summarized in "questions that need to be asked" in light of "some educational challenges" of today (173). In this, the author again invites the reader to enter into dialogue with the tradition, observe contemporary realities with the same honesty that De La Salle exercised, and then live out "the Lasallian way of being" (175). Given the context of the 2020 pandemic, this is a providential invitation.

De La Salle seen as a catechist is the focus on a chapter that looks at a deeply personal dimension of De La Salle's vocation as priest, since "catechesis is not an aspect of De La Salle; it is rather his structure. Sometimes one forgets that De La Salle was a doctor of theology" (179). The analysis of his catechetical works, especially his monumental *Duties of Christian toward God*, does so in a brief and yet complete way, even comparing his work with those of his contemporaries. From an analysis of the terms *catechesis* and *catechism*, to the various sources that contributed to the text of the *Duties*, to the historical integration of catechesis into the school's curriculum, to the

inclusion of De La Salle's Meditation #194 in its entirety, to the institutions and tools by which catechesis was lived out, to the way of reading his catechetical writings today; all of these inform the scene the author invites the reader to enter into at the end of the chapter. "Writing bent over his work table . . . , De La Salle seems to be telling us . . . [that] the really important thing, the one that will make the decision for yes or no, is the encounter that others will have with the truth of what you are and what you live . . . [M]ake sure that your words correspond to your life" (206).

The last chapter of this work addresses the Lasallian mission today. Its approach is somewhat different from previous chapters because it focuses entirely on the Lasallian global mission in the world. Yet what remains is the author's commitment to provide engaging and relevant information and input that will help the reader come to a better understanding of the topic. This is applied to the notion of "mission" and the theology of mission today. It encompasses the integration of the Lasallian mission within the mission of the Church today. And it traces the Lasallian educational mission from the past to its manifestation today in contemporary Lasallian documents – such as *The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* – along with its best clusters of intent for tomorrow. The six summary essential aspects or convictions that are provided take on rich meaning because of all the material that has preceded them in the book. The book itself is a good illustration of the author's summary statement: "The past pushes us on the path of those who have gone before us" (220).

There is an additional "excursus" on zeal as the distinctive competence of the education in Lasallian spirituality. While not essential to appreciating the substance of the book's content, it is a sort of encore to what has preceded it. And just like the encore of a pianist is both welcome and richly textured through the experience of having just finished a fine and lengthy concert, this additional section builds on what has come before and highlights one key aspect of Lasallian spirituality in a richly textured way.

This book, which hopefully will be translated into the English language, both presents and demonstrates the ongoing and living Lasallian educational heritage that has embraced so many educators, both in the past, in the present, and into the future. We are all blessed by its availability, since it will stir hearts and form minds that carry this living charism forward and will benefit all those yet to be touched by the life and example of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, along with the spirituality and educational heritage that claims his name.