
“Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher”: An Interpretation for Academic Administration in Higher Education

Matt J. Nowakowski, EdD¹

Introduction

Considerable study and reflection have been given to the understanding and relevance of the Lasallian twelve virtues of a good teacher to the work of contemporary teachers.² Within the context of a university faculty, the applicability of the twelve virtues in the academy has been a popular topic for discussion and dialogue at conferences and symposia and in literature.³ As in John Baptist de La Salle’s schools, various members of Lasallian Catholic universities, including faculty, are called to work in the administration of our schools. This paper will explore the portability and resonance that may exist between the practice of the Lasallian twelve virtues of a good teacher while performing the duties of administration at a Lasallian Catholic university. Drawing from De La Salle’s writings in *The Letters of John Baptist de LaSalle*, *The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility*, *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*, and *Meditations* as well as the author’s own administrative experiences as a program director, dean, and vice provost for faculties and academic administration at a Lasallian Catholic university, this paper explores how the twelve virtues can be applied to academic administration.

The purpose of this essay is to inform an engaged dialogue on the applicability of the twelve virtues to administrative work. This work has been inspired by a renewed discussion of the importance of character and virtue education at Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota. For this paper, I understand *virtues* to be behaviors, dispositions, and attitudes exhibiting high moral standards. Since virtues are “taught, caught, and sought,”⁴ it is important for administrators at Lasallian Catholic universities to model these virtues in their work. It is indeed the aim of the renewed discussion of character and virtue to help promote the university’s mission to “equip students with the skills to lead ethical lives essential for a flourishing society.”⁵ This aim resonates deeply with the one of the foundational Gospel maxims of the Institute, that it is through a Lasallian Catholic education and in the presence of the Holy Spirit, students will be transformed and have a life of abundance.⁶

This paper presents *twelve short vignettes*, one for each of the Lasallian teaching virtues. Each vignette has a supporting statement from De La Salle, a brief description of the virtue, and a practical interpretation from my experience working in administration. For an in-depth discussion of each of the twelve virtues of a good teacher with corresponding biblical references, please refer to the comprehensive treatment offered by Brother Agathon.⁷

A number of limitations are present in this approach. The interpretations presented are viewed through an epistemology of my experiences as a faculty member and administrator at a Lasallian Catholic university in the United States. While there may be applicability of these examples to

Lasallian Catholic universities in other countries, or Lasallian Catholic schools in the K-12 system, the validity and reliability of these comparisons cannot be assumed.

1. Gravity (Seriousness)

“Decorum requires that as a Christian, you never utter a single word that is contrary to the truth or to sincerity or that shows your disrespect for God or lack of charity for your neighbor.” De La Salle⁸

Gravity is an important virtue that addresses the exterior or observable presence of an administrator. The work of academic administration often requires a steady temperament in working with complex and emotional challenges between students and faculty as well as operational and financial decision-making. To gain the confidence of students and staff, university administrators need to show consistency in manner, fairness, and an appreciation of all viewpoints in discerning problems.

One key area of responsibility which requires keen attention to fairness and consistency by an administrator is in the application of university policy to student and faculty grievances. Administrators are tasked with running the grievance proceedings, making sure the policy is correctly followed, and most importantly ensuring that all parties have an equitable and fair opportunity to represent their perspectives. Just as gravity can be applied to effective classroom management to support inclusion and equity, this virtue is essential in the fair application of university policy and procedure.

2. Silence

“You say often you do not know how to keep silence. You must try to learn how. Knowing how to be silent when appropriate is a great skill.” De La Salle⁹

The virtue of silence presents the interesting paradox of understanding when to avoid speaking, while knowing when one should speak to represent the voice of the unheard, or in the case of the university administrator, the voice of the university. University administrators are in the unique position of having their words presented as a representation of the school, so care must be taken in how ideas are presented and messaged. Silence, and an ability to actively listen, are key components to help administrators understand the perspectives and opinions of all their constituents, and in essence work toward effective problem solving.

As in De La Salle’s time, today’s university administrators may find themselves working with teaching faculty to study and share the best practices in current pedagogy. As exhibited by the early revisions of *The Conduct of Schools*¹⁰ the practice of sharing and developing effective teaching practices is an essential component of our Lasallian teaching approach. Meeting with and talking to faculty about teaching is one of the most enjoyable parts of my job. Much like meeting with dissertation students, I find myself listening and trying not to offer solutions. Rather, I try to offer ideas to help faculty critically think about their teaching. Administrators can embrace silence effectively when observing classroom teaching and new faculty orientation and by listening to the concerns of both new and experienced staff members.

3. Humility

“Instill in them the innocence and humility that our Lord recommends so strongly in the Gospel.” De La Salle¹¹

As Brother Agathon suggests, humility stands juxtaposed to pride.¹² Humility calls for and appreciates modesty and the avoidance of jealousy and avarice; it welcomes a willingness to share within the community, and the courage to act, often in anonymity. Thus, for an administrator, humility is critically linked to the integrity of their office.

In a practical sense, successful Lasallian university administrators act as “fixers” of difficult operational problems. Balancing budgets, negotiating personnel disputes, effectively providing the needed scarce resources to run the school, and upholding academic rigor should all be supported by university administration. This support should be done seamlessly, with the administrator leaving neither a fingerprint nor a footprint behind, so the school runs with flow and a tempo that supports learning.

4. Prudence

“Guard carefully against allowing yourself to act according to whim, because such behavior is a horror to God.” De La Salle¹³

To the university administrator, prudence is about the deliberation of what to do, and what to avoid doing. In our world, scarce resources are human capital, time, and fiscal resources. Being able to deliberate carefully on the most effective and efficient use of scarce resources is an important component of administration at a Lasallian Catholic university. In many cases, the institutional memory of experiences an administrator may bring from past experiences can offer to support these scarce resources.

As in other areas of management and leadership, problems have a way of reappearing on a repeating cycle, with discernable and understandable causes. Seasoned administrators have witnessed and “felt” the pulse of a school under different stressors, such as mid-term examinations, finals, the week before a break, etc. A practical example of prudence in this case is the often uptick in use of writing center services the weekend before a major term paper is due. Appropriate staffing in the writing center, support for students, and understanding the investigation of issues in academic integrity are decisions the prudent administrator can choose to support.

5. Wisdom

“The Supervisor shall let the teachers exercise full authority in their duties, giving them to understand that they should act in all things as though the Supervisor was not present.” De La Salle¹⁴

In a direct sense, the virtue of wisdom stems from having the knowledge to accomplish our work at hand. However, in administration, wisdom also suggests an understanding of timing, appropriate choices, equifinality, and the motivations of how and why actions are undertaken. It is essential

for the Lasallian administrator to start with a belief that those they work with are bringing knowledge, opinions, and perspective from a good place in the heart. Wisdom as a virtue enlivens the mission of the university in the thinking and decision making of the administrator.

Just as in De La Salle's time, administrators should research and model practical teaching wisdom for the faculty. Practically speaking, administrators utilize wisdom in staying current in their academic fields and by continuing to research, write, and engage in academic discussion. They may devote time each week to research and writing, join academic panels to give talks, present papers, and volunteer time as reviewers and editors for appropriate journals to give service to the academy. In addition, administrators need to pursue the most current knowledge of market trends in enrollment, admissions, finance, and strategy.

6. Patience

“When you are engaged in a conversation in which an argument develops, as ordinarily happens in academic circles, you must listen attentively to what the others say.” De La Salle¹⁵

The virtue of patience allows us to endure challenges, calms the mind, and encourages us to accept what is before us without complaint.¹⁶ For Lasallian university administrators, patience supports us in seeing the “big picture,” through the daily trials and tribulations of operations, and emboldens our endurance through harsh words, critiques, and sentiments. Often university challenges consist of a complex set of variables to balance, and often require a substantial investment of time and resources without a quick resolution. Patience allows us to pursue these solutions with forbearance.

The Lasallian university administrator should be able to see through and beyond disagreeable sentiments expressed in the heat of a moment during negotiations with faculty, staff, and students. Patience allows us to investigate beyond outward “symptoms” of disagreement to pursue an understanding of the underlying issue(s). It is through compassion and an understanding of what truly are the issues at hand that we can pursue resolution.

7. Reserve

“That teachers ought to walk through the streets with great modesty, and by their external behavior edify everyone.” De La Salle¹⁷

Reserve helps us act in moderation, to help us harness emotion and passion so they do not outweigh wisdom, patience, and prudence in our thoughts and actions. As Brother Agathon reminds us, reserve in thought leads to reserve in action. While patience helps us endure challenges, reserve encourages us to clear thinking and action before challenges are experienced.

To a Lasallian administrator, reserve is a key virtue in mitigating differences between aggrieved parties. Whether a grade grievance between a student and instructor, disagreement between faculty members, or differences in approach between members of the operations and academic units of the university, reserve allows us to champion careful critical thinking and thoughtful action. For the administrator, it is essential to exercise reserve when the passions and tempers of students,

faculty, and staff reach a boiling point. Reserve is manifested as arguments are tempered to dialogue and compassion leads to understanding.

8. Gentleness

“A kind word, says the Wise Man, turns away wrath, while a harsh reply stirs up fury.” De La Salle¹⁸

A quick review of popular leadership texts will bring to the fore the prevalence of kindness as a key trait in transformational leadership.¹⁹ Kindness, fairness, flexibility in approach and a willingness to practice epoché and suspend judgment are key traits of the Lasallian administrator who exhibits gentleness. Gentleness supposes kindness toward all, with equality and without preference.

Academic appeals, the process for students to have a hearing concerning disciplinary findings, matriculation decisions, or academic standings are times when gentleness is needed. In these moments, students are stressed, sometimes desperate, and vulnerable. A kind word or words, especially when engaging in a difficult conversation, can make the world of difference to help the student move forward to a peaceful and positive resolution.

9. Zeal

“Your zeal for the children you instruct would not go very far and would not have much of a result or success if it were limited only to words. To make it effective, your example must support your instructions, and this is one of the main signs of your zeal.” De La Salle²⁰

The virtue of zeal describes and embodies passion for the vocation of education. Many Lasallian Catholic administrators first find their vocation for teaching in the classroom, and practice the individual charism in the content discipline. Exhibiting zeal as an administrator means sharing their passion and fidelity for a Lasallian Catholic education through the operation of the university.

Lasallian administrators can manifest the greater mission of the Institute and mission of the university through the support of formation and inclusion programs and the development of a thriving university community in the spirit of De La Salle. The devotion of time, talent, and treasure to the support of formation and community is how the Institute has continued to evolve over three centuries.

10. Vigilance

“All should cooperate in maintaining good order in their schools by acting together in a spirit of mutual dependence, by demonstrating a spirit of regularity, and by observing exactly all that has been prescribed for them and all that God expects of them.” De La Salle²¹

Vigilance calls us to remain watchful for danger, challenges, opportunities, and threats around our school. The virtue of vigilance considers the long-term, for us to be aware and act in the best

interest of the students, faculty, and staff of the school. Vigilance requires commitment in time, effort, and resources to ensure the sustainability of our schools.

Recently, Lasallian administrators have had to work with significant societal challenges to the safety and wellbeing of members of our communities. Operating our schools within a global pandemic, with stress and risk being constantly present to the physical and psychological health of our communities has brought many complex challenges before administrators. Vigilance requires us to be keenly and constantly aware of these challenges, to gather the best data possible, and to make decisions with the health and safety of the community in mind.

11. Piety

“I realize, my very dear Brother, the difficulties that arise when serving Brothers are entirely involved in temporal matters, but even more trouble occurs when the Director does so. My very dear Brother, we have had only too much experience of this in the past. If a Director becomes exterior, his entire community is lost, but if a serving Brother is lost, he only loses himself.” De La Salle²²

“Piety is a virtue that makes us fulfill worthily our duties to God.”²³ Brother Agathon reminds us that piety is as much an interior virtue of the heart as well as it is observable to the exterior world through actions and deeds. Lasallian administrators need to be sincere in their interiority, so that they model the virtues and character of mission to the school. Along with sincerity, piety presumes a community of inclusion, acceptance, and understanding.

Administrators at Lasallian Catholic universities need to conscientiously work to provide means to support the inclusion, dignity, and access of any student who wishes to pursue a Lasallian Catholic education. In addition, in practicing interiority through prayer, meditation, reflection or praxis, we model and create an environment of caring and inclusion for all the members of our university community.

12. Generosity

“Consider Jesus Christ as the Good Shepherd of the Gospel, who seeks the lost sheep, puts it on his shoulders, and carries it back to restore it to the fold. Because you are taking his place, consider that you are obliged to do the same thing. Ask him for the grace needed to procure the conversion of hearts.” De La Salle²⁴

Brother Agathon suggests generosity is a “noble” virtue; one that requires us to sacrifice freely, to give of our own for a greater good.²⁵ In an administrative role, rather than being driven by personal interests, the best interests of the school, especially the students, needs to be at the core of the mission and decision-making. Just as faculty are called to be generous in spirit when working with students, Lasallian administrators must come from a heart that is giving and devoted to the vocation of teaching and learning.

Lasallian administrators contribute to the greater good of the university through service in many venues. From personal interactions with students and faculty, outreach to benefactors, and external

relations to the greater communities, Lasallian administrators represent the mission of the Institute. In accepting a role in the administration of the university, we forego our beloved work of direct instruction of students to serve the greater mission of the university and Institute.

Conclusion

There are many challenges and opportunities facing our universities today. It is essential that we engage in this work aware of and in the presence of faith, as Saint James suggests: “For just as a body without a spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.”²⁶ As in De La Salle’s times, it is only “together and by association” that faculty and administrator work effectively in this environment to deliver the best education we can to the students who seek it. The twelve teaching virtues offer us a unique set of behaviors, dispositions, and attitudes that can inform all who work in our schools in support of the Lasallian mission.

Endnotes

1. Matt J. Nowakowski currently serves as the vice provost for faculties and academic affairs and is a professor in the Doctor of Business Administration program at Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota. He was named a Distinguished Lasallian Educator at Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota in 2020.

2. William J. Merriman, “De La Salle’s ‘Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher’: Still Relevant Today?” *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 10, no. 2 (Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota, 2020).

3. Elizabeth Seebach and Lori Charron, “Envisioning a Lasallian Online Pedagogy: Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher in a Digital Environment.” *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 6, no. (Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota, 2015).

4. Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota, “Position Statement: Character Education and Virtue Formation,” 2nd edition, 2021.

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6. *John* 10:10.

7. Brother Agathon Gonlieu FSC, “*The Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher and Circular Letter of 10 April 1786 concerning the Public Contests and Competitions Carried Out at the End of the School Year in Different Houses of His Congregation,*” English Edition (Washington, DC: Christian Brothers Conference, 2000).

8. *The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility*. Translated by Brother Richard Arandez FSC and edited by Brother Gregory Wright FSC (Lasallian Publications, 1990), p. 109.

9. *The Letters of John Baptist de La Salle*. Translated and edited by Brother Colman Molloy FSC and Brother Augustine Loes FSC (Lasallian Publications, 1988), p. 209.

10. *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*. Translated by F. de La Fontainerie and Brother Richard Arnandez FSC and edited with notes by Brother William Mann FSC (Lasallian Publications, 1996).

11. *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*. Translated by Brother Richard Arnandez FSC and Brother Augustine Loes FSC. Edited by Brother Augustine Loes FSC and Brother Francis Huether FSC (Lasallian Publications, 1994), p. 451.

12. *The Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher and Circular Letter of 10 April 1786 concerning the Public Contests and Competitions Carried Out at the End of the School Year in Different Houses of His Congregation*, p. 26.

13. *The Letters of John Baptist de La Salle*, p. 34.

14. *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*, p. 266.

15. *The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility*, p. 126.

16. *The Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher and Circular Letter of 10 April 1786 concerning the Public Contests and Competitions Carried Out at the End of the School Year in Different Houses of His Congregation*, p. 40.

17. *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*, p. 194.

18. *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*, p. 142.

19. Peter Guy Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*. 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2007).

20. *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*, p. 455.

21. *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*, p. 198.

22. *The Letters of John Baptist de La Salle*, p. 48.

23. *The Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher and Circular Letter of 10 April 1786 concerning the Public Contests and Competitions Carried Out at the End of the School Year in Different Houses of His Congregation*, p. 80.

24. *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*, p. 439.

25. *The Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher and Circular Letter of 10 April 1786 concerning the Public Contests and Competitions Carried Out at the End of the School Year in Different Houses of His Congregation*, p. 85.

26. *James 2:26*.