



Our Lasallian Heritage

Committed to the Poor



Detail of a Gagliardi painting showing De La Salle distributing food to the poor.

*We are poor teachers,
forgotten and little
appreciated by the people
of the world.*

*It is only the poor
who come looking for us;
they have nothing to offer
us but their hearts.*

De La Salle

Reflection Questions

- 1) Where and how is the voice of the poor part of our conversation? Where can we be more deliberate in serving those who are poor?
- 2) What am I doing to become more aware of the life of those who are economically poor?

There are certain issues that are "pivot-points" for Lasallian educators—issues that are important enough to **struggle with** continually, to **talk about** at length, and to **deal with** on many levels. The Lasallian commitment to the poor is one of those issues.

It is a healthy sign that we do so, for our commitment to education and to the poor is aligned with our commitment to **the Gospel** itself; something that is never complete, something that is both an **irritant** and a **beckoning**, our greatest challenge and our greatest legacy. Boards of trustees and administrators in Lasallian schools grapple with its constant demands and display any evidence of its success with justifiable pride. This is a commitment that lies **at the heart** of what we do as Lasallian educators, whether directly or indirectly, and therefore we pay more attention than usual when the topic comes up. It is as if the momentum of centuries of tradition swells up beneath us and carries us forward in favor of the poor, the disadvantaged, and the marginalized.

The **centrality** of this commitment began with De La Salle and the first schools. The first Christian Schools were endowed parish charity schools that operated on a shoestring budget and were most often located in the less desirable parts of town. The teachers survived with meager food, little sleep, much prayer, very demanding work, and a **great passion** for educating the poor. Everyone was welcome to attend, provided that they were willing to be treated outside of the prevalent societal categories. Schools were tuition-free not only because the Gospel itself was free, but also because everyone thus became **equally poor and equally rich**. Of primary worth was each student; of predominant value was an **education without borders**.

Partiality was shown, however. Those with less attractive qualities were to receive the most attention, and those with the least talents were to be especially supported and encouraged. De La Salle was convinced that the poor were the ones who needed Christian Schools the most. A curriculum that combined practical and religious training was specifically designed to help the poor succeed in society. **Penmanship, politeness, and prayer** were part of the same picture, pieces of the same program. Those who were without and had little hope of gaining access to society's options became vested members of both society and the Church by way of an education that held the Gospel as its model and maintained a decided preference for the poor as its **operational benchmark**.

Our inclination towards education and the poor is a **deep incentive** that brings focus to our efforts and choices. Going beyond concern for the poor as a form of charity, our call is to dwell within the world of the poor and to **allow that world to define** how we respond to all the rest, instead of the other way around. "How can we teach the poor?" becomes "**How can the poor teach us?**" Such a switch in priorities is neither quick, comfortable, or easy—there are **real consequences** and **real costs**. Yet school programs and curricula discover what they seek based on the questions that they pose, and the Lasallian school is one where the commitment to the poor is as real as the poor themselves are.



Programs [in Lasallian Schools] must be frequently examined to see that they correspond to real needs. Courses must be organized and educational standards set in such a way as to foster the human development of the poor, for whom the Institute has a special concern. Persons must be the center of educational systems rather than the prestige of some academic curriculum.

– Declaration, 31.2

The purpose of this Institute is to give a human and Christian education to the young, especially the poor, according to the ministry which the Church has entrusted to it.

– Rule, Art. 3



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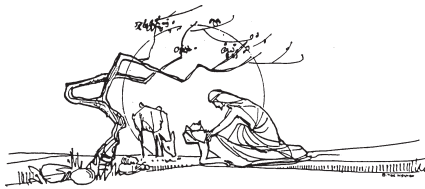
De La Salle

You are under the obligation to instruct the children of the poor. You should, consequently, cultivate a very special tenderness for them and procure their spiritual welfare as far as you will be able, considering them as members of Jesus Christ and his well-beloved. Faith, which should animate you, should make you honor Jesus Christ in their persons, and make you prefer them to the wealthiest children on earth because they are the living images of Jesus Christ our divine Master. By the care you have for them, show how truly dear they are to you. (*Meditations 803*)

You are required by your work to love the poor, since the task you have in this work is to devote yourself to their instruction. Look upon them as images of Jesus Christ, and as those who are best disposed to receive his Spirit in abundance. In this way the more affection you show for them, the more you will belong to Jesus Christ. (*Meditations, 173.1*)

You have the happiness to labor for the instruction of the poor and to be engaged in a work which is esteemed and honored only by those who have a truly Christian spirit. Thank God for having placed you in so sanctifying a state, and one providing for the sanctification of others, which nevertheless has nothing attractive to others, and even gives those who labor in it frequent occasions to be humiliated. (*Meditations, 113.1*)

You will give account to God... whether you have taught your disciples the things in the catechism that they should know according to their age and ability; whether you have not neglected some students because they were the slowest, perhaps also the poorest; and whether you did not show favoritism toward others because they were rich, or pleasant, or naturally possessing more lovable qualities than the others. (*Meditations, 206.1*)



Consequences for taking a commitment to the poor seriously:

To Introduce – *Explicit*: distribute statistics on the economic / cultural profile of the studentbody. *Implicit*: participate and support student & faculty involvement in local charity efforts.

To Foster – *Explicit*: provide funds for students who financially cannot attend retreats, club trips, etc. *Implicit*: encourage faculty gatherings that maintain a certain simplicity of style.

To Enhance – *Explicit*: provide a faculty-selected full scholarship for a needy student. *Implicit*: establish cooperative projects with poor elementary schools in the area.