



Our Lasallian Heritage

"Service of the Poor" & "Gratuitous Schools"

For most of the past 300 years of Lasallian history, the Brothers have struggled more with the early Lasallian commitment of "conducting schools gratuitously" than with the more recent concern about "service of the poor." According to one Lasallian scholar, Yves Poutet, it would be a complete misinterpretation of De La Salle's intention to say that he established schools exclusively for the poor. Lasallian schools are fundamentally aimed at those "far from salvation" among the common people of society – which in 17th century France meant the poor – including, but not limited to, those at the bottom of the economic scale.

De La Salle established educational institutions that directly addressed an ingrained and debilitating societal cycle in 17th century France. The "poor" of his day were the vast majority of the population, limited in resources, abilities, and security. Their opportunities for personal advancement were virtually nonexistent. Factors like illiteracy, vice, and indigence fed on each other, allowing little light – including the light of faith – to pierce the darkness. De La Salle's response was to provide well-organized schools with caring, dependable teachers who provided a comprehensive faith-centered education that was entirely and absolutely gratuitous.

Lasallian schools would not accept societal distinctions among its students based on wealth, status, or influence. It was those distinctions that had produced children who were "unable to live well and hence far from salvation." De La Salle looked more deeply than societal categories; he followed the example of Jesus. Lasallian schools were for the poor not only because they were so obviously in need, but also because the Gospel directed us there. Yet all were welcome in the schools, as long as it was understood that no tuition, gift, or favor would be accepted. Concern for the poor was fundamental but not exclusive. The Brothers faced lawsuits not because they were teaching the poor, but because they didn't confine themselves to teaching the certified poor. Gratuitous schools open to everyone are a dangerous thing.

Schools in the Lasallian tradition give fundamental attention to those who are "far from salvation" because of circumstances they cannot control or fathom, which especially means the poor. The way in which that fundamental attention is exercised today may be informed more by a contemporary interpretation of "conducting schools gratuitously" than by a too narrow interpretation of "service of the poor."

Reflection Questions

- 1) In what ways does my school or ministry, perhaps unconsciously, make decisions based on prevalent societal distinctions?
- 2) How can the intention behind "conducting schools gratuitously" be echoed in a budget-driven school of today?



De La Salle divested his wealth by distributing bread to the poor during the famine of 1683-84.

"If the poor were not the only ones to benefit from the Christian School, it was they who in the first place justified, and therefore continue to justify, its existence.."

– *The Poor...*, 1971; Maurice Hermans, FSC.

De La Salle

It is the poor that you have to teach; teach them by your example... You know, too, that you have committed yourself to keep schools gratuitously and to live on bread alone if need be, rather than accept anything. Be on your guard, therefore, never to receive anything whatever, either from the students or from their parents. (*Meditation 153.3*)

Since you have the advantage of working especially for the instruction of the poor, you should, according to the spirit of your Institute, have a much higher regard for them than for the rich. You should also live as the poor do and detached from everything in order to have some conformity with them. Have, then, as much love for poverty as people of the world have for wealth. (*Meditation 143.2*)

Every day you have poor children to instruct. Love them tenderly ... following in this the example of Jesus Christ. Prefer them to those who are not poor, for Jesus Christ does not say: *the Gospel is preached* to the rich, but *to the poor* [Mt. 11:5]. The poor are the ones entrusted to you by God, and to whom you are obliged to proclaim the truths of the holy Gospel. (*Meditation 166.2*)

“The apostolate with the poor is an integral part of the finality of the Institute. ...Every level of authority, then, every dialogue and decision in the Institute, must be in harmony with this orientation, so that all our plans and work will show in deed and in truth our ‘return to the poor.’”

– *Declaration*, Article 28.2; 34.4

“The lifelong commitment of the Brothers to one another and to the educational service of the poor defines the specific nature of the Institute.”

– *Rule*, Article 11

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“I have long advocated that each of our schools be an ‘impact center,’ that is to say, a center which ‘reaches out’ to the poor around it and responds creatively and effectively. The possibilities for service are almost unlimited: literacy programs—in the school or in other centers; teams of volunteer teachers and young people to work with street children; night classes for school drop-outs; Lasallian youth groups to respond to the needs of the sick, the aged and neglected, etc. Many of our schools ‘reach out’ to the poor of other countries by providing financial assistance. Some even send young people, teachers, former students, parents, and friends for service in needy countries during vacations periods.”

– Br. John Johnston, FSC

“Many economically poor youngsters are extremely talented intellectually. They have a right to develop their God-given talents and abilities. We must be careful to avoid forcing the economically poor into a special category, as if economic poverty were equivalent to a lack of ability to learn. We need to open the doors of opportunities to those who have become marginalized by circumstance.”

– Br. John Johnston, FSC

