



Our Lasallian Heritage

The Grace of Education

In a country where gift-giving and gift-getting are part of the social fabric, especially at the end of the year, it's worth pointing out that the gifts that seem to make the most difference have nothing to do with the newest toy, the latest gadget, or the most expensive present. The **real gifts** are those deeper and more quiet things that, like stepping outside at night beneath a skyfull of stars, ones that bowl you over simply by their presence. De La Salle knew that education could be one of these kinds of gifts.

He wrote, "It is a great gift of God, this grace he has given you to be entrusted with the instruction of children, to announce the Gospel to them and to bring them up in the spirit of religion. . ." Whether in the classroom, in the street, or in the living room, whenever one encounters a true **teaching moment**, a gift is given and a gift is received.

Authentic teaching, such as the kind of teaching that occurs throughout the New Testament, is a gift that can neither be measured or paid for. The best that we can say is that it is a manifestation of God's grace – something that happens without expectation of acknowledgment or immediate reward. Thomas Aquinas called teaching one of the **greatest forms of charity** because the teacher does not see the results of his/her efforts. The essential giftedness of teaching is what makes it a manifestation of God's grace.

De La Salle emphasizes this aspect of the teaching vocation by insisting on "the establishment of the Christian Schools, where the teaching is offered free of charge and entirely **for the glory of God.**" Against all norms and standards of the time, the Brothers were not to require any fees from the parents, even from those who could afford them. The Brothers could expect their students to be well-dressed and to bring the proper supplies to class. But the teaching itself would be **entirely gratuitous**. Even all gifts from students, especially tobacco (!), were to be politely returned.

Such a sense of gratuity is yet part of the teaching experience. Although a "free" education is neither expected nor provided in most U.S. private school contexts, no one doubts the fact that, in terms of monetary rewards, education is more a field of dreams than a river of gold. There is **a real gratuity, a giftedness**, a grace, that remains an essential element of those who teach – whether as a coach, an administrator, a Board of Trustees member, a parent, a staff person, or a teacher in the classroom. It is this



This detail from a painting of De La Salle at the school in Paris bears testimony to the giftedness of education.

gratuity, this giftedness, this **grace from God** that becomes the means and the message of the Gospel.

Philip Yancey writes, "Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us more ... and there is nothing we can do to make God love us less." The fact of the birth, life, passion, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus makes this **a reality**, just as the fact of each genuine teaching encounter makes God's grace a reality and, once again, brings forth an incarnation. And that reality stares us in the face every day.

Reflection Questions

- 1) What kinds of things do you believe about education: about the nature of the student, about the teacher and the teacher-student relationship? What is your pedagogical creed?
- 2) How do you remember your best educational moments and experiences? What made them memorable?

Consequences for taking the grace of education seriously:

To Introduce – *Explicit*: have each department lead the prayer at faculty meetings. *Implicit*: accept, without judgment, late notes from students kept after class by a previous teacher.

To Foster – *Explicit*: provide articles, books, videos, etc. on the subject of teaching as a vocation. *Implicit*: bring in one inspirational teacher each year as a speaker to the faculty and staff.

To Enhance – *Explicit*: include some aspect of the grace of education as a component of your faculty retreat. *Implicit*: financially support and encourage spiritual retreats about teaching.



The Brothers seek to understand the deep aspirations of those they work with. Sensitive to social and religious contexts, they discern the most appropriate ways of announcing the Good News.

– Rule, Art. 11



Educating the young is no less important today than it was at the time the Institute was founded. The population explosion is everywhere increasing the ratio of the young in proportion to the total population. . . . They compose a special sociological group . . . They think, judge and react in a way that is peculiar to them. . . . The importance that we now attach to young people only serves to underscore how detrimental is the shortage of educators who can serve them with unselfish love and genuine competence. When they do not have adequate guidance from the adult world, the young tend to close themselves off from the rest of society. They revolt, they are corrupted and fall prey to ideologies that are more interested in exploiting them than teaching them to merge into adult society or preparing them to be of service to humanity.

– Declaration, 36.1-2

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De La Salle

Look upon the children God has entrusted to you as the children of God himself. Have much more solicitude for their education and instruction than you would have for the children of a king. *(Meditations, 133.2)*

Consider, therefore, how important it is for you to apply yourselves as well as you will be able to educate well those who are under your guidance, and to procure piety for them. This is the principal object and the purpose of your work.

Be assured that you will succeed in this only if you make yourselves pleasing to God, and that he will pour out on you and your work his abundant blessing only insofar as you make their education your principal concern. *(Meditations, 186.1)*

Tell the parents, too, what Jesus Christ said about the sheep of which he is the shepherd and which must be saved by him: I came, he said, that they might have life and have it to the full. For this had to be the kind of ardent zeal you had for the salvation of those you have to instruct, when you were led to sacrifice yourself and to spend your whole life to give these children a Christian education and to procure for them the life of grace in this world and eternal life in the next *(Meditations, 201.3)*