Our Lasallian Heritage

From the Practical to the Practical

Lasallian education has a passion for the practical, a passion that pays real attention to immediate realities. A teacher could never survive otherwise; a school would fail without it. This popular advice is also ours: *Pray as if everything depends on God and work as if everything depends on you.*

De La Salle set the tone in his own life. He was never one to avoid the practical; indeed, he embraced it. De La Salle did not write about educational philosophy, he wrote educational handbooks and textbooks. A handbook for running the schools, written in consultation with his teachers, went through 23 editions up to 1903, each edition adapting to new needs and circumstances. De La Salle's textbooks focused on everything from French syllables to Gospel maxims, the duties of a Christian, and the practical rules of politeness. The schools themselves were eminently practical. Written work concentrated on contracts and ledgers, while math skills dealt with the French monetary system. Students who worked during the week were taught mathematics, drafting, and commerce on Sundays. Schools on the seacoast included classes on navigation and seamanship. De La Salle insisted that the schools be well-run and its teachers be well-trained. Everything was done to insure that these poor and working class students would succeed in French society and become mature members of the Church.

Prayer, instruction, vigilance and good example define the elements of Lasallian education. (Painting by Benjamin Vautier, 1829 – 1898)

Such a commitment to the real needs of students was not without its difficulties. One might almost call the first schools "subversive." When the Guild of Writing Masters, in effect, sued the Brothers for teaching writing—and won—De La Salle ignored the judgment and found other ways of teaching writing. When the local bishop in Chartres, a friend of De La Salle's from seminary days, challenged De La Salle's practice of teaching reading by starting with French instead of Latin, De La Salle held his ground, writing a detailed response on why his method was a much more realistic approach. After more than 30 years of labor, when it seemed to De La Salle that he was hurting the success of the schools, he even took himself out of the picture until he was ordered to return by the Brothers. The practical and spiritual welfare of the students entrusted to his care remained a primary focus throughout his life: practical means for practical ends.

This down-to-earth practicality is found today in Lasallian schools throughout the world, from street-kids in Vietnam who are taught to repair motorcycle engines to students throughout the West who are taught to translate book-knowledge into life-knowledge. Within today's shifting family structures and media's tendency to dull one's critical posture into uniformly simplistic thinking habits, the Lasallian School pays practical attention to the real relationships between people, the development of a sensible integrity among personal convictions, and a continuity of purpose from the present to the future. It is those practical sensibilities that continue to make this educational enterprise so necessary and so successful.

Reflection Questions

1) How important is the practical side of things when it comes to your ministry or institution? Can you point to examples?

2) If you were to ask parents and/or students what they would like to be able to know and do when they graduate, what would they say?

Consequences for taking the practical seriously:

To Introduce – *Explicit*: provide new teachers with a "how to" guide to the school, including tips on teaching. *Implicit*: welcome and facilitate feedback regarding school structures.

To Foster – *Explicit*: pay attention to social and family dynamics. *Implicit*: support practricums, field trips, guest speakers, etc.

To Enhance – *Explicit*: require a practical component for each course. *Implicit*: organize school assemblies around practical topics.

John Baptist de La Salle was deeply moved by the way in which "the children of the artisans and the poor" were abandoned and left to themselves. As a practical response to his prayerful consideration of this fact in relation to God's plan of salvation, he came to discern, in faith, what God wanted the mission of the Institute to be.

– Rule: Art. 11

When the students are to assist at Holy Mass during school time, they will leave school in the order of the benches...Teachers will take care that the students do not go too near the walls, the shops, or the gutter... In order that they may more easily to see the students and observe how they behave themselves on the way to Holy Mass, teachers will walk on the opposite side of the street from them, the students walking ahead of the line, with their faces sufficiently turned toward their students to be able to see them all. While on the street, teachers will not admonish students ... but will wait until the next day, just before going to Holy Mass, to correct them.

– Conduct of Schools: Ch. 8, Art. 11

De La Salle

[Reasons for teaching reading in French] ...2) The French language being the natural one, is incomparably easier to learn than Latin by children who hear the one spoken and not the other. .. 4) Reading French prepares the way for reading Latin, whereas Latin does not help for French, as experience teaches us... 10) Experience shows that almost all the boys and girls who do not know Latin, who have neither letters nor the use of the Latin tongue ... are never able to read Latin well, and make a sorry show when they read it .... It is therefore quite useless to spend a lot of time teaching people to read well a language they will never use." *(Letter to Bishop Godet des Marais)*

In order to bring the children whom you instruct to take on the Christian spirit, you must teach them the practical truths of faith in Jesus Christ and the maxims of the holy Gospel with at least as much care as you teach the truths that are purely doctrinal. *(Meditations 194.3)*

It is, then, not enough to procure for children the Christian spirit and teach them the mysteries and doctrines of our religion. You must also teach them the practical maxims that are found throughout the holy Gospel. But since their minds are not yet sufficiently able to understand and practice these maxims by themselves, you must serve as visible angels for them in two ways. First, you must help them understand the maxims as they are set forth in the holy Gospel. Second you must guide their steps along the way that leads them to put these maxims into practice. *(Meditations 197.2)*

We should not be satisfied with making acts of speculative faith alone, i.e. on truths which we merely believe in. We must often make acts of practical faith also, i.e. on the truths which we must practice. *(Duties of a Christian)*

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