



THE MINISTRY OF TEACHING

07-C-29

I would like to begin by thanking the district for giving me the opportunity to share some thoughts on the teaching ministry of the Christian Brothers. Though I am very much honored I have found it one of the most difficult things to do. It is difficult in that the Brothers are probably the most critically professional group for whom one could write. We are critically professional in that both as a group and as individuals we are always reflecting on, and putting into practice, techniques that are proven, suitable, "in touch" with the needs and desires of those who are entrusted to us. We are, I find, a group of dedicated teachers who, despite our human frailties and individual idiosyncracies, are out to give the best we have to our students and colleagues.

As stated by Brother Joseph Brienza in the first of this series of articles "teaching is an art and not an exact science". I in no way feel that I have mastered the art but I am the richer and wiser in appreciating it. Because of meeting and having been touched by many masters (brothers, sisters, laypersons, and students), I have developed into a good teacher. These masters have influenced me to appreciate what teaching is all about.

Let it be clear from the outset that the best I can do is to share by means of some random thoughts, in no particular order, what has been given to me.

Teaching always involves two things: exposing the student to new information and experience and trying to personalize the discovery of what it means. Information will affect a person's behavior only in the degree to which he or she has discovered the personal meaning of that information. The challenge is how to help students explore and discover the meaning. Unless I can communicate the facts with some degree of affect then the learning is unlikely to take hold or influence behavior. In the junior high curriculum here at Saint Gabriel's I, as Social Studies teacher, spend time on the Constitution. I do it because I feel not only that my students should be aware of it as a document but more importantly that they come to see it as a "living" document, the knowledge of which can give them power and a basis to understand what this country and its laws are all about.

If true learning is to take place, I feel that the teacher must address four even more basic factors. I would list these as self-concept, feelings of challenge or threat, values, and feelings of being cared for and/or belonging.

What students believe about themselves affects very deeply every aspect of their behavior and learning. Students who believe they can are more likely to try and thus are more likely to succeed. Positive teacher feedback and encouragement enhance a student's self-concept and tend to bring about success. I find this extremely challenging and trying because it means I must constantly be aware of my personal impressions of the student which may for some reason "go against my grain". Students, however, who believe they cannot avoid the embarrassment and humiliation of involvement are likely to experience failure—which only proves what they already thought about themselves in the first place.

The second factor is feelings of challenge or threat. How often have we heard or read that learning occurs best when teachers are successful in creating atmospheres that are challenging without being threatening? The student's feelings, attitudes and beliefs are powerful sources of motivation and if I am sensitive to them the learning situation will be more productive. There is no

doubt that feelings of challenge are conducive to learning while those of threat are ultimately destructive.

The third area is that of values. Values can be defined as generalized belief that serve as basic guidelines and determine our behavior. They are deeply personal and charged with feelings or affect. They play an important part in the dynamics of all we do. We as brothers have values at the very core of our being. We live and breathe them and I have often pondered on what the Brothers really taught me as a student at Bishop Loughlin. Then and now we value knowledge, skills, critical thinking, lifelong education, good citizenship, faith in a loving and merciful God, zeal for what is best. When I reflect on my years at Loughlin, it is not the factual knowledge I recall but individual brothers "teaching" by example what it means to be human — "the glory of God fully alive".

If I know that I am cared for and belong, I feel excited, energized; I want to get involved; I want to get with it; I enjoy the activity. If I feel uncared for or left out, I feel discouraged, disillusioned, apathetic; I want to get out, to avoid embarrassment and humiliation.

As I reflect on what I have just written I find that I have only repeated far less eloquently what de La Salle wrote in his *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*. Phrases such as "Be faithful in order to do as much as you are able..." "If you want the instructions you give those whom you teach to be effective in drawing them to the practice of good, you must practice these truths yourselves". "You must also be full of zeal". "You must cheer the fainthearted, support the weak and be patient towards all". "Your zeal toward those you teach would not go very far and would not result in much success if it limited itself only to words. To be effective your teaching must be supported by your example".

My vision of teaching is dependent on the good teacher and I recall some advice given by Brother Francis Huether. (He will, I hope, pardon the liberties I may have taken with it).

1. Have confidence in yourself, your vocation, your natural ability, in the wisdom, advice and good example of your confreres.

2. Live by supernatural motives. You will achieve much if you live by high ideals.

3. Ardently desire to be an excellent teacher and work for it! Aim for clarity. Seek to challenge. Involve each student to his/her ability. Extend them, enlarge their outlook.

4. Plan your work, then work your plan.

5. Be patient. How well de La Salle put it: "Patience is the leading characteristic of great minds".

6. Be persistent. Keep working for the goals you have prudently set for yourself and for the class.

7. Evaluate yourself, your work and your results constantly. Don't become stagnant.

8. Cooperate with those who are involved with you.

Not only is the above applicable to the good teacher but also pertinent as to what we should be teaching those entrusted to our care.

As I read over what I've written, I wonder if education, like life, is never at an end or standstill. It continues to challenge (if we allow it to) us as we come in contact with new faces, different places and circumstances. Every situation presents an opportunity to grow and develop. That challenge is there every day in every student and colleague with whom I meet and work.

"Consider, then, that your reward in heaven will be as great as the good you will achieve in the lives of the children who are entrusted to your care. It is in this spirit that St. Paul told the Corinthians: 'You will be our glory in the time to come on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ'".

If we fulfill our duty and accept the challenge of our ministry, there is no doubt we will be able to enjoy the blessing de La Salle wrote of above in the 16th Meditation and thereby "shine as stars for all eternity".

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