

## THE NATURE OF LASALLIAN SPIRITUALITY

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### 1

The phrase "Lasallian spirituality" is more frequently used than it is understood. Ask any Lasallian educator what "Lasallian spirituality" means and you will hear opinions ranging from confused platitudes to genuine insight. Many recognize the importance of pursuing its meaning, yet few find the time or the resources to do so. After all, we do have schools to run. While such dedication to the mission of education already reveals an essential component of Lasallian spirituality, it may be helpful here to provide some brief ideas on the topic as catalysts for further discussion and as guidelines for personal reflection.

#### The Word "Spirituality"

Today, in the United States, the word "spirituality" is used to describe the totality of an essentially personal experience involving a variety of integrated dimensions. Astronauts and journalists, New Age ministers and taxicab drivers, government officials and Lasallian educators: all seem to be reaching for a comprehensive consideration of their focused experience when they use the term "spirituality."

The history of the use of the word "spirituality" does not provide much help in defining its meaning for today. (1) Sandra Schneiders brings some clarity to the issue by positing the study of Christian spirituality as a field whose object is the Christian spiritual life as experience and whose methodology includes description, analysis, and constructive interpretation so as to fully understand the phenomenon. (2) For most people, however, the word simply refers to any wide-ranging, marginally understood, deeply personal sense of integrity and purpose. "Spirituality" is the word that is used today when all other words aren't big enough or deep enough.

Lasallian educators must look to the personal experience of St. John Baptist de La Salle for an understanding of the word "spirituality" that proceeds from the Holy Spirit's effective presence in his life. The definition of "spirituality" that emerges from his lifelong encounter with God in the world is the one that is most appropriate for describing the continuation of his charism, and his spirituality, today.

#### Lasallian "Spirituality"

De La Salle himself provides a key to his spiritual journey: "one commitment led to another" over a long period of time

in ways unforeseen in the beginning. From 1679 on, De La Salle found himself drawn into ever-deepening convictions, ever-widening commitments, and evermore-challenging practices. Together, these formed into the living reality. De La Salle's essential integrity, the continuity of his reflected experience, shaped the nature of this spirituality. Who he was defined what he would do.

De La Salle's personal integrity establishes the timbre of what "spirituality" means within a Lasallian context: spirituality refers to the dynamic integration of foundational convictions, basic operative commitments, and consistent practices. This general definition, like all definitions, is universally accessible. But it is particularly applicable to De La Salle, emerging from his personal spiritual experience, an experience that immediately introduces theistic, Christian, and Catholic realities. In De La Salle's life, what stands out is the degree to which the integrity between faith-filled convictions, commitments and practices became manifest. Beyond the specific characteristics of his spirituality, when we speak about "spirituality" in a Lasallian context, it is this understanding of spirituality that lies at the root of De La Salle's character.

#### "Lasallian" Spirituality

When one looks at the "Lasallian" aspect of Lasallian spirituality, two things are immediately evident: 1) Lasallian spirituality is intimately associated with Lasallian pedagogy, and 2) Christ's life lies as the heart of it.

1) Lasallian spirituality is a spirituality that has the school as its setting, the teacher as its focus, and the salvific potential of education as its inspiration. De La Salle's writings show that the Brother's life with his students constituted the very center of his religious experience; the school is the place where God is to be encountered.

In the Collection, De La Salle writes: "Do not distinguish between the duties of your state and what pertains to your salvation and perfection. Rest assured that you will never effect your salvation more certainly than by fulfilling well the duties of your state." (3) And again in one of his letters: "One of your main preoccupations... should be to apply yourself to prayer and to your class work, for these are your two principal occupations." (4)

There is no separation between the professional journey and the spiritual journey. Both are aspects of one singular commitment to education. The early Rule included sections on the school and the Conduct of Schools included sections on the school's religious life. Both are components of a single

reality. Lasallian spirituality is Lasallian because prayer is put to work in the life of the school.

Likewise, Lasallian pedagogy is Lasallian precisely *because of*, and not *in spite of* or *along with*, its dimensions of Lasallian spirituality. Educational historians credit De La Salle with many educational innovations, but not one of these historians has yet pointed out that it is ultimately the life of faith that motivated and shaped the pedagogy of De La Salle and the Brothers. His spirituality is focused on the specific approach, implementation, and context of the activity of education. It is a spirituality that is concerned with education's consistent practice, the educational activity that takes place at a specific place with specific individuals according to a specific methodology. De La Salle's spirituality, Lasallian spirituality, is one that is expressed as a pedagogical spirituality.

De La Salle came to describe this "spirit(uality)" in the life of the Brothers as the spirit of faith and zeal, a single spirit consisting of two parts that are intimately bound up with each other, zeal emerging from an active faith and faith informed by the fruits of zeal. It is essential to see faith and zeal as two aspects of the same commitment, two dimensions of the same experience. One without the other is an empty shell. Without zeal, faith had no substance, and without faith, zeal had no purpose. Faith and zeal more than complement each other; they bring both to life. With zeal, faith finds expression, and with faith, zeal finds direction. Both come to fruition in the ministry of teaching and the work of education.

2) The life of Christ lying at the core of De La Salle's commitments also lies at the core of Lasallian pedagogical spirituality. Despite many aspects of 17th Century French Spirituality that would find little favor today, "the Christocentric spirituality of the French School was diffused so widely that for all practical purposes Catholic spirituality in modern times could be characterized as French spirituality." (5)

Christ is to be found in the teacher: "you are ambassadors and ministers of Christ... representing Jesus Christ himself. He wants your disciples to see him in you and receive your instructions as if he were giving them to them." (MTR 3.2) Not only has Jesus Christ chosen teachers to bring the Gospel to others and thereby to become genuine disciples themselves. Lasallian teachers have been chosen to be "co-operators in the salvation of souls." (MTR 4.2) As precursors of Jesus Christ (M 138.3), as servants of Jesus Christ (M 182.3), as Apostles of Jesus Christ (M 159.2), teachers make Jesus Christ a reality in the lives of their students.

Christ is to be found in the student: "Recognize Jesus (in)...the children whom you have to instruct. Adore him in them." (M 96.3) What a difference it would make if teachers treated their students as "living images of Jesus Christ" (M 80.3) and "as the children of God himself" (M.133.2) deserving greater consideration than children of a king. Students today in many ways are still "weary and exhausted travelers" (M 37.1) or "abandoned orphans" (M 37.3) whose lives may be profoundly effected by those who "honor Jesus Christ in their persons." (M 133.3) Each soul is a living plant in the field of the Church (M 46.3), the Body of Christ. Each student shares in the life of Christ and is called to enter into that life most fully.

Christ is to be found in the work of education: the task is "to help your disciples to save themselves... you must engage them to unite all their actions to those of Jesus Christ." (MTR

3.1) The work of salvation, the proclamation of the Gospel, is truly encountered and practically enacted in the day-to-day activities, relationships, and realities that make up school life. The goal is nothing less than "to establish and maintain the kingdom of God in the hearts of your students." (M 67.1) That kingdom becomes established and is maintained through the dynamic presence of Jesus Christ in the life of the school, among teachers "commissioned by God to clothe them with Jesus Christ himself and with His Spirit." (M 189.1) Christian education consists of "prepar(ing) the hearts of others for the coming of Jesus Christ." (M2.2)

Christ is to be found in the prayer of education: "Constantly represent the needs of your disciples to Jesus Christ, explaining to him the difficulties you experience in guiding them." (MTR 3.1) The prayer of the Lasallian educator is directed to Jesus Christ and seeks to make Jesus Christ the source, means, and end of education. Prayer obtains all that one needs for effective teaching, drawing "upon yourself the light you must have to know how to form Jesus Christ in the hearts of the children entrusted to your guidance." (M 80.2) Within the context of prayer, faith and zeal are brought to life, transforming the work of education into a ministry of prayerful service through education, into a singular response to Jesus Christ and the Gospel, into a pedagogical spirituality.

The question may be asked: just what does this "pedagogical spirituality" look like? Remembering that any condensed statement falls short of the full reality, a general notion may still be helpful. In succinct summary, the pedagogical spirituality of De La Salle that is reflected in his writings consists of the complete integration of faith and zeal through the transforming, dynamic presence of the living Spirit of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, in a teaching community of chosen individuals. The spirit of faith looks on all things with the eyes of faith, does all things in view of God, and attributes all things to God. This faith seeks to dwell continually in the presence of God. The spirit of faith is expressed in the spirit of zeal, one that seeks the salvation of students through prayer, instruction, vigilance, and good example, according to the Christian spirit and as found in the Gospel. This faith and this zeal find their dynamic integration in the Holy Spirit, who leads, animates, and transforms the teaching ministry into one of hope, love, and power. The Spirit of Jesus Christ, encountered in prayer and in the classroom, is the living presence through whom, by whom, and in whom the work of education proceeds. The Lasallian spiritual quest, experienced within the ministry of education, is the continual conversion towards the person of Jesus Christ, both in one's exterior actions and in one's interior dispositions. Such a conversion is effected through the mission of education, along with a detachment from conflicting influences, an awareness of God's constant presence, an abandonment to God's will, and a sublime confidence in God's providence.

### Lasallian Spirituality Today

Having presented some ideas for understanding the meaning of the term "Lasallian spirituality", what remains to be considered is its effective realization in today's world, a world where classrooms are surprisingly similar to their 17th century counterparts in comparison to the vast changes in technology, mobility, and communication. Education has remained relatively unchanged through the centuries, perhaps because the essential component in any educational endeavor is the teacher / student relationship, a relationship

that cannot be automated, that depends on personal encounter. Education in this respect shares in the life of the Trinity, a dynamic relationship of personhood. (6)

Lasallian spirituality today recognizes and applies those dimensions of its tradition that continue to incarnate De La Salle's charism and characteristic spirituality in today's educational world, a world where "the need for this Institute is very great."

## 2

### Lasallian Spirituality Today

The goal of Lasallian education is the same as that of all Christian education: to form genuine disciples of Jesus Christ and mature members of His Church. How this is accomplished introduces the character of Lasallian spirituality.

The language of Lasallian spirituality should not focus so much on "capturing" the nature of Lasallian identity, an elusive goal at best. Instead, such language can and should provide access to the authentic life of Lasallian education today, allowing one to speak about Lasallian education in a significant, realistic way. Anything else merely establishes new verbal layers separating what we do from what we say we do.

### Lasallian Basic Operative Commitments

Bearing in mind the definition of "spirituality" that emerges out of De La Salle's own spiritual experience (spirituality refers to the dynamic integration of foundational convictions, basic operative commitments, and consistent practices), Lasallian spirituality today may best be expressed as a set of basic operative commitments that incarnate convictions into practices, that integrate faith and zeal. These commitments (postures, orientations, intentionalities) identify emphases that together define the parameters and dynamics within which Lasallian life dwells, without particularizing the practices that guarantee their unconditional realization. "Commitments" were key in the life of De La Salle and provide a very Lasallian focus on the intimate relationship between faith and zeal, between the spiritual journey and the professional journey, between who we are before God and who we are before our students. The language of commitments is still key in the life of De La Salle's followers.

Ten such Lasallian commitments for today may be discerned. While space does not allow for elaboration, you are invited to reflect on the ways in which each of the proposed commitments fulfill these seven requirements: 1) based on events in the life of St. John Baptist de La Salle, 2) supported by foundational convictions in his writings, 3) evident as operative commitments in early Lasallian history, 4) reflected in consistent practices within Lasallian Schools, 5) meaningful for the contemporary situation of schools and society, 6) impossible to imagine a school in the Lasallian tradition without, 7) possible to imagine a Christian school to function successfully without (in terms of relative emphasis).

The ten commitments are here presented in the form of attributes, qualities that identify specific aspects of Lasallian

character. As such, they become operative when joined with particular activities. They are nothing in themselves unless joined with specific, concrete endeavors. They are components of a dynamic reality, functioning as a whole, mutually shaping their particular emphases. The first set of five commitments are more directly related to the spirit of faith; they speak of inner dynamics of Lasallian pedagogical spirituality. The second set of five commitments are more directly related to the spirit of zeal; they speak of dynamics of Lasallian pedagogical spirituality that reach outward, that color the mission flowing from Lasallian identity.

### The Spirit of Faith

1) *Centered in and Nurtured by the Life of Faith:* Christian faith provides the motivation, the context, the direction, and the support for the mission of Lasallian education.

2) *Trusting Providence in Discerning God's Will:* God guides those engaged in the Lasallian mission with absolute trustworthiness. The work is God's; we are God's instruments.

3) *With Creativity and Fortitude:* When the invitation to the Lasallian mission is clear, God blesses and supports that which is done with imagination and determination, ingenuity and endurance.

4) *Through the Agency of the Holy Spirit:* The Spirit of Christ effects the work of salvation through prayerful persons open to God's dynamic presence both within their souls and in expressing their Lasallian mission.

5) *Incarnating Christian Paradigms and Dynamics:* The Lasallian mission brings alive and brings present, Gospel realities and the essential elements of Christian life within the world of education.

### The Spirit of Zeal

6) *With Practical Orientation:* Lasallian education strives to be realistic in its approach, its ends, and its goals. Prayer is put to work; practicality counts.

7) *Devoted to Education, Accessible and Comprehensive:* Lasallian education must be accessible to all who desire it, and it must include all that constitutes a complete Christian education.

8) *Committed to the Poor:* Lasallian education makes every effort to be of service to the poor, to make educational service of the poor an effective priority.

9) *Working in Association:* Lasallian education is accomplished as a common dedication to the shared mission of education, one marked by cooperation and complementarity.

10) *Expressing a Lay Vocation:* Lasallian education is a lay vocation expressing and encouraging common baptismal realities as followers of Jesus Christ.

All of these commitments are vital components of the experience of Lasallian education. Together they make up a unified set of characteristic basic commitments integral to what it means to be Lasallian. Each commitment may be further elaborated in terms of its ramifications in the schools, i.e., one can speak about what **ought** to happen when they are realized with integrity. Dissonance between the ramifications of Lasallian commitments and their experienced reality in schools today wouldn't so much critique present

practice as highlight the specific areas that deserve attention if one takes the Lasallian tradition seriously.

It is to be noted that some of these commitments may, at first glance, appear to be hopelessly idealistic. As a result, some people will quickly and easily dismiss them as both unrealistic and irrelevant. The more difficult route is to take them as seriously as De La Salle took them, and to apply them, as rigorously as De La Salle applied them. His articulation and practice of commitments such as these allowed for little compromise. The challenge today is to apply them with similar creativity and fortitude.

### How to Apply Them

The simple and minimalist approach to the incorporation of Lasallian commitments in school life would be to ask key questions of any Lasallian school situation or activity. These key questions, drawn from the commitments, focus on the considerations emphasized by the Lasallian tradition. As long as one has more than a passing acquaintance with De La Salle, these questions will quickly establish the degree to which the various aspects of an activity incorporate Lasallian school commitments. The questions may be presented as follows:

- 1) Does it look at everything with the eyes of faith, do everything in view of God, and attribute all to God?
- 2) Does it show a trust in Providence? Is it guided by an openness to God's will?
- 3) Does it proceed with creativity and fortitude?
- 4) Is it planned / accomplished / animated through the agency of the Holy Spirit?
- 5) Does it incorporate Christian paradigms and dynamics?
- 6) Does it arise out of practice and return to practice?
- 7) Is it focused on accessible and comprehensive education.
- 8) Does it include / display / transmit a clear preference for the poor, for the disadvantaged?
- 9) Is it done in a way that exemplifies and fosters a united vision and common effort?
- 10) Does it have a dimension that will help individuals enhance their understanding / appreciation / involvement in the Church as part of the laity?

### An Example – The Importance of Prayer

We might take as an example the fifth commitment; incorporating Christian paradigms and dynamics. One manifestation of this commitment is the Lasallian devotion to prayer. Prayer is something that is shared among the other Lasallian commitments in various ways. Presently, however, prayer will be considered as a manifestation of Christian paradigms and dynamics in school life.

For a full consideration of prayer in the Lasallian world, each of the seven requirements for a Lasallian operative commitment might be articulated. But that cannot be done here. Simply looking at Lasallian literature, however, it is clear that De La Salle himself speaks frequently about prayer and its intimate integration in the ministry of education. Both prayer and study establish the foundation upon which the work of education is built. "Strive to know God so well through reading and interior prayer that you may be

able to make him known to others, and make him loved by all those to whom you have made him known." (M. 41.3)

Prayer is not an option when it comes to authentic Christian education, since "by prayer you will draw upon yourselves the grace of God that you need to do this work." (MTR 8.1) Prayer obtains all that one needs for effective teaching, drawing "upon yourself the light you must have to know how to form Jesus Christ in the hearts of the children entrusted to your guidance." (M 80.2) Prayer "gives a holy power" to one's words, making teachers able to effectively penetrate the depths of their students' hearts. (M 159.2) The more prayer is practiced, "the more God will help you find the skill to touch their hearts." (M 148.2) "Be assured that the more you devote yourself to prayer, the more you will also do well in your work. For you are not of yourself able to do anything effective for the salvation of souls. Therefore you should often turn to God to obtain from him what your profession obliges you to give to others." (M 95.1)

What is given to others is the Spirit of Jesus, and it is for making this Spirit come alive in oneself, especially in time of difficulty, that one prays (MTR 3.1) Powerlessness, personal weakness, or human temptation in the activity of teaching all find their answer in prayer "which will infallibly give you the power to accomplish what is beyond your natural strength." (M 36.1) Such prayer is not a feeble dependence based on personal insecurity, but rather recognizes and works with the powerful graces of God operative in one's life and accessible within the lives of others. The activity of teaching in the Christian School "will succeed only in so far as we are aided by his help and directed by his Holy Spirit." (M 107.1) The Lasallian teacher must ask God earnestly that all instruction "be given life by his Spirit and draw all their power from him." (M 195.3) Only by such means will teaching resonate with God's own life so that "those who belong to him may have life and have it more abundantly." (M 45.1)

### Prayer in the School Today

What is the contemporary role of prayer in the Lasallian school in terms of the student, the teacher, the teacher/student relationship, the activity of teaching itself, or the school in general? The Lasallian commitments should help us articulate the answers.

As an example, consider some general insights about prayer in the Lasallian school. For Lasallian schools today, prayer remains a key manifestation of the commitment to incorporate Christian paradigms and dynamics in the life of a school. The commitments to prayer is a commitment that non-Lasallian Christian schools undoubtedly share. But the way in which the commitment to prayer is realized reveals its Lasallian face. Responding to the Lasallian operative commitments questions presented above, what does "Lasallian prayer" look like? Here are just one statement and one example for each:

- 1) Lasallian prayer directs attention to the ways that faith is active in real situation.
  - Consider daily school-wide prayer for specific intentions.
- 2) Lasallian prayer highlights God's ongoing presence in immediate history. "Let us remember..."
  - Reflect on what God is communicating in this situation.
- 3) Lasallian prayer seeks imaginative and courageous ways of responding to God's conduct in our lives.

- Include various levels of appropriate response by students.
- 4) Lasallian prayer leaves room for the Holy Spirit's influential, untamed participation.
  - Allow for extemporaneous prayer and "unlikely" prayer leaders.
- 5) Lasallian prayer brings Christ's ongoing paschal mystery to the fore and makes it personal. "Live, Jesus, in our hearts..."
  - Relate each prayer to the Gospel, specifically.
- 6) Lasallian prayer sticks to what is really happening and what is really needed, with simple words and ideas.
  - Insist on the option for an action response.
- 7) Lasallian prayer is accessible to all who are praying and introduces "the larger picture".
  - Provide posters, etc., for particular prayer themes.
- 8) Lasallian prayer is prejudiced towards the poor and the disadvantaged, sometimes surprisingly so.
  - Pursue the difficult and perhaps unpopular course.
- 9) Lasallian prayer is communal prayer, participating in a common, world-wide dynamic.
  - Introduce prayer-partnerships among schools.
- 10) Lasallian prayer is non-sacramental prayer.
  - Model prayer-forms available to all Christians.

Looking at this single manifestation of one of the Lasallian commitments, along with just a few of the ramifications that may be pursued, it should be clear that each aspect of

Lasallian education may undergo similar scrutiny and be pursued with similar imaginative rigor. Taking on that effort with honesty, an awareness of the Lasallian tradition, and an openness to the designs of Providence will deepen those aspects of Lasallian education that continue to make it such a worthwhile endeavor.

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(1) See for example, **Schneiders, Sandra M.** "Spirituality in the Academy." *Theological Studies* 50.December (1989): 676.

(2) **Schneiders, Sandra.** "A Hermeneutical Approach to the Study of Christian Spirituality." *Christian Spiritual Bulletin: Journal of the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality* 2.1 (1994): 14.

(3) **De La Salle, John Baptist.** *Collection of Various Short Treatises.* Translated by W. J. Battersby. Edited by Daniel Burke. Romeoville, IL: Lasallian Publications. 1993, p. 78.

(4) **De La Salle, John Baptist.** *The Letters.* Translated by Colman Molloy, FSC. Edited by Colman Molloy and Augustine Loes. Romeoville, IL: Lasallian Publications, 1988. p. 35.

(5) **Aumann, Jordan.** *Christian Spirituality in the Catholic Tradition.* San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985. p. 218. It is noteworthy that De La Salle's time was somewhat similar to our own in being a post-conciliar time period.

(6) This idea is also evident in 17th Century spirituality. "... (We) are a reflection in some way of the inner mystery of the Trinity,... We are most ourselves when we reflect the loving relations of the divine reality itself." (**Thompson, William,** ed. *Bérulle and the French School.* New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1989. p. 35).