

**THE LAITY IN THE MINISTRY  
OF ST. JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE  
AND SHARED MISSION**

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*On June 10, 1997 Brother Abelardo Arribas defended his doctoral dissertation at the Angelicum in Rome. His topic was the subject of this paper.*

*We have included here some paragraphs that have been taken from his scholarly dissertation defense.*

No one today would question the important role that the Second Vatican Council has played in the history of the Church. And one of the most effective points in the renewal of the Church has been in presenting it as the People of God where all the faithful, through their Baptism, participate in the divine relationship, enjoy an identical dignity, cooperate in a common mission, and establish a communion among all Church members. It follows that it is more important in itself to be a member of the Church than to occupy a particular place within it.

Here is where the doctrine on the laity appears in Vatican II documents as one of the most relevant elements inherited from the council. Never in the history of the Church has a council spoken more extensively, systematically or positively about the laity.

In addition to Vatican II we should also add the 1987 Bishops' synod that dealt with the *vocation and mission of the laity in the Church and in the world* and this synod crystallized the teaching in the Exhortation *Christifideles laici*, the great letter on the laity.

The content on the lay person remains on the level of suggestion and often remains there without attempting to put it into practice within a given time line. Among the laity themselves there are not many who have fully realized their Church function and mission. A change that is called for is for that type of practicality not take as long in coming as has been the case in recent years. Nevertheless one can say that the signs of the times are working in favor of this movement of the renewal of the laity.

Participation of the laity in the Church's mission is not a **concession** on behalf of the hierarchy. We find the true cause for this in Church theology and in the sacraments of initiation which provide a solid foundation for all Christian life.

In the hands of the members of the Church, also in our hands, one finds the possibility of changing hopes into realities as cited in the post-conciliar documents. The council decrees, rather than being an end in themselves, are in fact a beginning towards arriving at new objectives. The difficult part is upon us now: for we, the Brothers, to bring forth fruit from the planted seed following in the footsteps of John Baptist de La Salle.

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De La Salle showed a great concern for the laity. If in the beginning it seemed that his destiny was headed for a brilliant ecclesiastical career, the meeting with Mr. Nyel, seemingly by chance, would make him change his life's direction to the point of converting him into a founder of a ministry sustained by lay religious.

We think that it was not by chance that Pius XII solemnly proclaimed St. John Baptist de La Salle as the heavenly and universal patron of teachers on May 15, 1950. De La Salle offered a body of pedagogical and spiritual doctrine which teachers should study in order to understand his reality more thoroughly.

The Congregation follows the directives of its founder. It marches to the pace drawn up by the Church concerning the doctrine of the promotion of the laity. Years ago we were made conscious of the great effort being made by Christian lay teachers who offer their service to society in Lasallian centers. The Institute has opened its doors to a mutual collaboration with the laity.

The Holy Spirit calls by means of historical situations, including when, at first sight, they may seem unpleasant or negative.

On the eve of the third millennium there is emerging a new era for the Church and also for De La Salle's Institute. It is the era of shared mission. In terms of the relationships among its members - lay persons, clerics, religious - the Church is probably experiencing the most important change since the time of the first Christian communities.

Here are the motives that have made us hopeful as we tackled this research.

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This work that we present "*The laity in the ministry of St. John Baptist de La Salle and shared mission*" comprises seven chapters.

The first chapter offers a synthesis of the situation of the laity in the Church. It serves as a gateway to understanding the term **laity** and it is followed by some historical brush strokes that will point out to us some changes throughout the centuries. Immediately we will be faced with the difficulties one encounters when trying to give a definition to the word laity.

In the second section of this first chapter we offer an analysis of its **identity** that is far from providing a harmony of criteria as it is presented by theologians; the **secular character** as an important footnote in the life of the laity; the richness that presupposes participation in the triple munificence without hiding the fact that there are still questions that need to be answered both in the area of doctrine as well as in the area of ministry.

The lay person is part of the plan for the building up of the Kingdom. The doors of **apostolic activity** are open. **Holiness** is not being prevented. In the concrete carrying out of their mission they must find adequate means for sanctification.

We consider this to be a preliminary and introductory chapter that will serve as the backdrop for the remaining chapters. There will be continual implicit or explicit referral to this chapter.

The *laity in the ministry created by De La Salle* summarizes the content of the **second chapter**. In it we will see the progressive approach of the saint towards the social reality of the teachers and of the world of exclusion in which the needy students found themselves.

De La Salle gradually becomes aware of this teaching effort, its importance and greatness. In response to this, he founds a society composed solely of lay persons totally dedicated to remedy the situation. His concern for extending the efforts of the Christian teachers everywhere brings him to the point of creating schools to train rural teachers and so take care of the needs of those who cannot come to the Brothers.

The saint discovers that the school is the best arena for human and Christian formation. But not just any school but in the *Christian School*, which is the topic of **chapter three** and whose characteristics are spelled out in detail. The goal: give a Christian education to children, who will obtain it from teachers having a sense of vocation, who are adequately trained and who know how to appreciate their mission as a ministry of God and to which He himself has called them. This is a school in which there is an air of Christian fragrance due to the very atmosphere of the school, its

methodology, organization, activity development and the place occupied by the student.

In *The Christian School Today* we ask ourselves about its proper reality, its identity and guidelines that characterize it. We will point out the **peculiarities** of the Lasallian School and we conclude this third chapter with an analysis of the presence of lay persons in schools administered by the Brothers.

The **fourth chapter** is devoted to presenting *Lasallian spirituality* as a way that is perfectly suited to the teacher.

To a great number of persons, De La Salle is known for his pedagogy; a far smaller number know him as a spiritual guide. In both areas he stands out in his own way; both of these areas are developed in perfect integration so that his pedagogy without his spirituality seems lacking and cannot be well understood and the reverse is also true.

The teacher needs an integrating principle that will bring new life to his daily activity that is carried out in the classroom. In order not to make a distinction between the duties of service to children and the duty of one's own sanctification, he needs a faith which is like a dynamic engine that is sustained in a spirituality which is tried and true. And it is precisely here where the spiritual edifice constructed by De La Salle is rooted.

The *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* contain the teachings of the spirit of faith adapted to the mission of teaching. This can be applied by equally as well by any teacher who calls himself Christian. This is a valid spirituality for everyone but it has a more direct application for Christian teachers.

The **fifth chapter** concerns itself with the *lay Lasallian teacher*. Here we examine the challenges that are presented to him in his own situation: social, educational, Christian. We then deal with the identity of the Christian teacher, which has its roots in the same Christian reality. In terms of the educational task, he will not be satisfied until success in living it as a ministerial vocation.

Certain attitudes are necessary for the Christian teacher, namely: achieving a unity of life, maintaining authenticity and coherence in his efforts, being an example for his students through the witness of his own life, living his faith and mission in community, a firm commitment towards the new evangelization, solidarity in the shared mission of the Church.

In the next section we draw a **profile of the Lasallian educator**; we stress competence, the Christian experience shaped by total dedication to education in association with other teachers for the purpose of energizing a Christian educational program that demands constant updating on the part of the educator; and all of this is carried out through a lived ministry.

We end the research with **two chapters** that are devoted to the topic of Shared Mission.

We deal with teaching supports in **chapter six**, after explaining the concept of Shared Mission and pointing out that De La Salle's Institute has opted for this. We find theological basis for this in **Baptism** as the ultimate bulwark. It is the **union** of all the members of the People of God that stands out in the **ecclesiology of communion**, as well as **diversity** and the **complementarity** of vocations, of life conditions, ministries, charisms within the people of God themselves. The concept of mission has the same nature. Communion results in **mission**. Because we are members of the Church we participate in the efforts of being proclaimers of the Gospel. Evangelization is not an act of individuals, it is an act that is basically one that involves the Church. Finally - in our case - it involves **participation in the Lasallian charism**.

We have left *formation for Shared Mission* for the **seventh chapter**. Lay preparation is indispensable if we are trying to carry out effectively the role that belongs to them. In the same way an adequate training is necessary if we want to energize the Shared Mission by preparing Brothers and lay persons.

The task presented is an ambitious one and can even in-

clude forging a Lasallian Christian Community but this, too, is within our grasp. What is being asked of the Brothers as well as of the laity is that both groups need to make an effort at metanoia, keeping in mind the suffering that this can bring but also they need to be convinced that it is the Spirit who is making all these demands. And the mission to which we have been called asks this of us.

The condition of the laity in current ecclesiology is definitively on the rise.

De La Salle showed such esteem for the laity that he devoted his life to teacher training, taking great pains to pass on the greatness of his ministry. He thought of a new type of school that would be an authentic Christian seminar; he held the banner high and this was enforced by having the children reach levels of sanctity by insisting that *they think frequently about Jesus, that they often speak to Jesus, that they desire only Jesus and breathe only because of Jesus*.

The *fixed decision in favor of the exclusive lay character of the Institute* perhaps can be best shown in the Founder's understanding of the condition of the laity within the Church.

He brought together **simple faithful persons** to live cohesively as baptized persons. He prepared them with a systematic catechesis, with an education filled with the spirit of the Gospel. He was very clear about thinking that without teachers who were well trained, the school's objectives would not be reached. He devoted great effort to the task of formation. This chapter takes a look at the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* and it compares the type of teacher the De La Salle presents with that of the usual one of the society of his time. There is an abysmal imbalance that can produce vertigo when one compares one with the other.

The **spirituality** that De La Salle proposes and inspires maintains its validity for the Brothers, teachers and other persons who wish to follow it.

The Institute founded by De La Salle has sustained concern for the laity in a lively way, especially for teachers. No wonder the Rule can affirm that *the Brothers have contributed to promoting the importance of the lay Christian since their foundation*. To this end, the Institute has devoted time, talent, physical materials and most importantly, qualified personnel.

We believe that few Church entities have so seriously taken up the cause and so earnestly worked for the development and integration of the laity as have the Brothers of the Christian Schools. The result: the Lasallian Family with all its various groups.

Shared Mission is more than a concept. It is an experience in which one enters. This is not a reality that is achieved due to the suddenness of a decree. These are new areas that must be explored and that require a new mentality accompanied with sustained effort and creative imagination.

The terms for and rhythms of Shared Mission are not identical; they vary from one Congregation to the next and even within the same institution, from one place to another and from one person to another.

The hesitancy that frequently appears concerning Shared Mission in different members is understandable but surmountable. A patient training program will go a long way to breaking down the barriers that are getting in the way of sharing.

Shared Mission, lived deeply, presents possibilities for mutual enrichment.

Shared Mission should be experienced as a process that needs to be continually revised and promoted. Openness to the present provides the best guarantee for us and the future. Once again we must remember the words of Scripture when we are told that *my ways are not your ways*.

Aware that we have begun the work of writing a new chapter in the relationship between members of the Church and that we are still in the beginning pages, we offer this small aid as we look at De La Salle's Institute and examine how the situation we now find ourselves in has come to be and at the perspectives for the future. •