

**CHARACTERISTICS
OF LASALLIAN SCHOOLS
IN THE USA
(1/2)**

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The year 1980 marked the 300th anniversary of the 1680 founding of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools by John Baptist de La Salle. A program, organized at Manhattan College in New York City to celebrate that event, was devoted in part to the characteristics of «the Brothers' school» in a lecture entitled «De La Salle and his Brothers: An Adventure in Education.» Since then others have had occasion to address this topic. In 1986, the USA Regional Education Committee published the results of discussions by Brothers and lay colleagues at the Huether Workshop in a booklet entitled *Characteristics of Lasallian Schools*. In the following year, the International Education Committee in Rome published the results of a symposium entitled *Characteristics of a Lasallian School Today*. In one way or another, this topic has also been addressed in the English language doctoral dissertations of Brothers Dominic Everett, William Mann, Frederick Mueller, and George Van Grieken, as noted in the introduction by Brother Dominic Everett to the recently published English translation of De La Salle's *Conduct of Schools*, edited by William Mann FSC.

Other factors have kept this subject to the forefront. On the one hand, there are those who argue that Catholic schools in the United States all have pretty much the same characteristics and that it is futile to try to distinguish one group from another. On the other hand, there are those who are convinced that indeed there is something special about the schools conducted or originally founded by the De La Salle Brothers, difficult to define perhaps, but distinctive nonetheless. Whatever has been distinctive about these schools seems threatened in the present situation where the number and influence of the Brothers in the schools are declining. As a counterbalance, the affirmation by the 42d General Chapter of 1993 of a Lasallian mission shared between Brothers and lay partners has provoked new interest in the educational achievement and vision of John Baptist de La Salle and the impact of that tradition on the schools. In many situations, that tradition will be increasingly in the hands of lay partners, with or without the presence of some Brothers. Now that institutions once identified as Brothers' schools have become more appropriately recognized as Lasallian schools, it seem more urgent than ever to articulate what it is that gives those schools their distinctive character.

In the conviction that the six characteristics proposed in 1980 have yet something to contribute to the ongoing discussion, this present essay will review and to some extent update the reflections that were made at that time. The suggestion remains that there are six elements which, taken together, constitute the concrete and distinctive reality of the Lasallian school.

The first such characteristic is a sensitivity to social needs. This is what started the Lasallian adventure in the first place. In the seventeenth century, John Baptist de La Salle became increasingly aware that the Christian schools were one solution to the urgent needs of the artisans and the poor. The expressions in the Rule of the Brothers can be paraphrased to apply to anyone teaching in a Lasallian school: «in their educational activity the teachers show a social concern for those who lack material goods, personal talent or human affection; this is an essential part of their mission.» Even when teaching the well-to-do, there is the obligation to teach «all the students that they have a responsibility to bring the reign of justice and charity to all the world.»

The social problems of today's world are not less acute but much more complex than they were in the Founder's time. And they are much less susceptible to direct and easy solution. In a secularized society, a religiously motivated or sponsored approach to social problems is not always welcome or even possible. Many situations of social injustice cry out for radical solutions that demand resources religious schools simply do not have. For these and other reasons, the Lasallian mission in many parts of the world has been extended to secondary schools and tertiary-level colleges, to the suburban apostolate as it might be called.

The development of such a mission is perhaps providential. For De La Salle it was not only the poverty of young people that was the problem, but the fact that they were «left to themselves and badly brought up» by parents who had to work to make ends meet. Today in the suburban schools we see many examples of a similar social situation. There are everywhere in relatively affluent suburbs, more and more students from broken homes and single parent families who desperately need the attention, affection, and inspiration that they can find in their Lasallian teachers as role models.

Yet, despite all the complexities and rationalizations, the Lasallian enterprise could not lose its traditional sensitivity to the needs of the poor without losing its identity. That is why the tuition in the Lasallian schools is kept relatively low. The schools try to extend scholarship programs, to make exceptional arrangements for the less gifted students and to treat them with special concern. In the United States there is a national Lasallian educational committee that serves as a stimulus and resource for our schools to introduce and to improve courses in social justice. These courses are designed to provide not only instruction in abstract principles but also to sensitize students to global social needs and, where possible, to provide some direct field experience in social action. Many of the teachers are personally involved in movements to alleviate world hunger, cut consumerism and change the social structures that perpetuate oppression and injustice.

The second but not secondary characteristic of the Lasallian school is the importance given to religious education. This, too, means something different than it did in the Founder's day. American society has never been religiously homogeneous; it is not exclusively or dominantly Christian, much less Roman Catholic. The *Declaration* from the General Chapter of 1967 recognizes this when it says: «Not all of those who come to a Christian School are necessarily looking for an education that is explicitly Christian. A keen sensitivity to the requirements of religious freedom obliges us not to impose indiscriminately the same catechesis on all our students, especially when they are more mature.»

For this reason, the Lasallian school recognizes that religious education today can mean many things. It can help the student understand his religious experience and commitment at the deepest level of maturity and freedom. Religious education reveals the element of mystery in human existence, the possibilities that transcend the empirical order, the horizons that expand the meaning of what it is to live and to die. Religious education is value-centered education and so concerned with all that relates to life, love, trust, fidelity, freedom, justice, brotherhood and sisterhood in community. Religious education raises doubts about limited perspectives and unexamined presuppositions; it raises questions that can lead from agnosticism to faith. A religious educator knows how to lead students who no longer respond to traditional doctrine and creeds, legal codes or sacramental cult, to seek new words to express what they doubt and what they believe, to externalize their awe at a transcendent mystery in sign and ritual that they can relate to, to identify their failure and to repent of sin, to live out their commitment in justice and love. This in no way excludes the opportunity that the Lasallian school has to challenge students, when it is appropriate, with the demands of their membership in the Catholic Church along with formal instruction in the Christian faith and, even better, an introduction to the more profound implications of the religious truth they already know and accept.

A third characteristic of the Lasallian school is commitment, in association, to teaching as a vocation. It was at once the most difficult task and at the same time the most noble achievement of John Baptist de La Salle to bring his followers to see that a teacher does not merely work at a job; teaching involves a vocation and a mission; the work that one does in the classroom has a significance that is worthy of the commitment and dedication of a lifetime. To speak of teaching as a vocation implies that there is a divine involvement in a personal choice. To enter upon a teaching career in a Lasallian context is viewed as a response to a call from God as much as a response to an advertised vacancy. In excluding the option for the priesthood from the Brothers, De La Salle was in fact inviting them to see teaching as a genuine vocation in itself and not attached to some other form of ministry, much less as a stepping stone to a more exalted ecclesiastical function.

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