

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

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In today's world there is need to reaffirm the vocation of the teacher. Teaching is seen today less as a vocation than as a profession, with professional standards to be met on the one hand and professional privileges to be jealously guarded on the other. And teaching is not generally regarded as one of the more lucrative professions. As the administrative structure of the schools becomes more complex, it is distressing to observe that more and more teachers seem ready to abandon classroom teaching for careers as administrators and guidance counsellors and in auxiliary services. Indispensable as these functions may be, the Lasallian school will lose an important part of its identity if the teaching staff does not appreciate the unique effectiveness of what happens between a competent committed teacher interacting with the students in the classroom.

This commitment takes place in an educational community where teachers are associated together to live out their vocation to teach. Association in the educational enterprise was such an important element for John Baptist de La Salle that he made it a religious vow. To this day, the vow of association for the service of the poor through education is one of the vows the Brothers take. In Lasallian schools today participation by association for an educational enterprise has to be, and indeed has been, expanded to include the lay and clerical colleagues of the Brothers. The traditional sense of association becomes concretized in a genuine educational community where, in the pursuit of knowledge, persons meet persons, mind speaks to mind, and heart to heart. Despite differences in states of life and lifestyle, Brothers and lay colleagues are called upon to live out this association for a shared educational mission in a common vocation to teach.

The fourth characteristic of the Lasallian school is the quality of the education that takes place there. That is part of what the word «Christian» in the designation of the schools originally stood for. The Founder favored the term Christian Schools to distinguish the Brothers' schools from the other charity schools of the day where chaos rather than quality prevailed. In contrast to noisy and filthy ruffians in the charity schools presided over by underpaid and undertrained masters, De La Salle insisted on cleanliness, politeness, discipline and — what was most unusual for the time — regular attendance. His teachers were dedicated and trained. This made scholastic progress possible. In a short time, the bourgeoisie, who would never allow their sons to mingle with the smelly roughnecks in the charity schools, began to seek admission to the schools of De La Salle, happy now to have them receive their education side by side with the poor. The Christian school got to be known as the best school in town.

That image is not as easy to maintain in today's world where educational procedures have been standardized and every school worthy of the name aims to provide a quality education. Nevertheless, the Institute of the Brothers still enjoys a reputation for running good schools, possibly because that remains at the heart of the mission of the Institute. This motivates the administrators in a Lasallian school to keep the standards of scholarship high and to provide the best possible opportunities for the teachers to grow professionally. The Lasallian school today inherits a tradition for maintaining good discipline, tempered by a spirit of friendliness that the Brothers and their colleagues aim to have prevail in their schools. This two-fold spirit of discipline and friendship creates a climate that supports and enhances the quality of the education that takes place in the classroom.

The loyalty of the associations of Lasallian graduates provides evidence for this. In today's world, where quality education is more generally available than it was in the Founder's time, it might be presumptuous to claim that the Lasallian school is always the best in town. But there is a powerful reason for Lasallian educators to want to maintain the advantage that comes from three hundred years of being number one.

The fifth characteristic of the Lasallian school is its emphasis on the practical. In the seventeenth century De La Salle had a clear sense of what was needed to advance the social situation of the children of the poor. If not the very

first to offer instruction in French instead of Latin, he argued for its practicality against the educational establishment of the time and demonstrated that it could work. He wrote a manual for the schools that puts the emphasis on the basics of reading, writing, and religious instruction with precise methodologies to produce effective results. The importance he gave to cleanliness and the rules of politeness made it possible for the children of the poor to move about more easily in the stratified society of the France of Louis XIV. The students left the Christian schools well-trained in how to write business letters, contracts, bills of sale and other useful skills that would ensure a decent livelihood.

To this day, Lasallian schools intended for the poor and disadvantaged still focus on training in skills and trades that will make the students useful to themselves and to society. The extension of the Lasallian mission in the United States to include secondary schools and university colleges was motivated by the practical needs of the immigrant generations, enabling them to qualify for careers in politics and the professions. More than most similar institutions, the Lasallian university, for example, tends to parallel instruction in the liberal arts with preprofessional training in specialized fields, especially commerce and engineering. Even the professional development of the teachers has tended to have a practical aim, more often than not determined by the credentials needed for personal advancement and to secure accreditation for the institution in which they serve.

This practical sense is so deeply rooted in the Lasallian tradition that, compared to the Jesuit tradition, for example, it sometimes seem to be verge on the anti-intellectual. That is not necessarily bad insofar as it keeps the attention centered on the needs of the students. However, there have always been some Lasallian teachers who develop into creative and productive scholars in various advanced fields of intellectual endeavor. In Lasallian universities, particularly, and in some secondary schools as well, there are teachers who argue that the most practical education is a sound theoretical one. In an age of technical know-how and explosive discoveries in empirical science, society needs theoreticians to think creatively and critically about what is going on in the world. It would not be a betrayal of the Lasallian sense of the practical if the schools were also to contribute a fair share of the future leaders in the humanities and the arts.

The sixth and final element that distinguishes the Lasallian school is rooted in the fact that, although the Lasallian Institute fulfills its mission with the blessing and within the broader mission of the Roman Church, it has managed at the same time to keep a certain distance from church concerns. The Founder did not want his Institute to become dependent on any particular bishop or local church authority. When threatened in one diocese he would move to another. Since he did not want to model his society too closely on any other religious congregation, he adopted a rather bizarre religious habit and moved cautiously and creatively in the matter of religious vows. Much has been made of the fact that he sent a Brother to Rome, but this was less a gesture of subservience than an attempt to have the Institute present and known in Rome for its educational mission and its distinctively lay character. The total exclusion of the priesthood kept the Brothers out of the mainstream of ecclesiastical politics and theological disputes. De La Salle was careful, before his death, to arrange for the election of a Brother to succeed him as Superior. Fundamentally obedient and intensely loyal to the Church, he yet kept an independent stance for the sake of the imperatives he saw in the Gospel.

With some notable exceptions, this attitude has prevailed in the history of the Institute and in the Lasallian schools. The Lasallian tradition is inclined to emphasize the simplicity of the lifestyle of lay Christians and to minimize manifestations of ecclesiastical pomp. Although Lasallian teachers and Brothers in particular usually respect and admire priests and the priesthood, sometimes almost excessively, they manage by and large to dispense with the external deference due to clerical privilege and rank. Being laymen themselves, the Brothers understand and are in a position to support movements to give laymen and lay women more leadership roles in the Church. Likewise in a Lasallian school, in contrast with what might be expected in schools conducted by the clergy, there is likely to be a more open and prophetic stance to some aspects of Catholic tradition, piety, and observance.

More than anything else, the Lasallian tradition have kept alive in the Church the spirit and reality of brotherhood. The Institute to which the Lasallian mission has been entrusted is composed of Brothers who are not fathers in any sense of the word. In contemporary language and life the horizontal model of brotherhood is more appealing than the paternalism implicit in the vertical model of fatherhood. At the same time, there is a growing realization that brotherhood implies sisterhood, that the brotherhood in the Lasallian educational community includes a sisterhood, establishing an equal and equitable relationship between teachers who can call one another brothers and sisters.

Those, then, are six distinctive features of the Lasallian school in the United States. To recap them briefly, they are: sensitivity to social needs, religious education, association in teaching as a vocation, practical instruction, quality education, and a unique role in the Catholic Church. Other American schools, no doubt, manifest many of these same qualities. But taken together they seem to describe that elusive something that we call a Lasallian school. It is the privileged instrument for the accomplishment of the shared Lasallian mission which is «to provide a human and Christian education for the young, especially the poor.» •