

NEW POVERTIES: RELATIONSHIPS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

In order for there to be any sort of relationship between two people, amongst community members or between a teacher and her/his class, there must be some sort of meaningful communication or dialogue. More than ever before, the 21st century communicates electronically. Has our technology become a hiding place? Is it a refuge from the emotional engagement we inevitably face when proximity is not simply in our fingertips and keyboards? Is there some dopamine released in our brains that creates an addiction to the computer, the Smartphone, the iPad that makes these devices more attractive than a living, human person who is sitting at the table with us or who is trying to reach out to us in moments of joy or grief? Research has reached multiple and sometimes contradictory conclusions about the impact of modern social media technologies on human community and relationship. How well do we communicate within our own Lasallian communities? Whether we live in an all-Brother community or with other Lasallians, each and every person has a story worth hearing and telling. How meaningfully do we communicate with one another? Oftentimes, some of us expect the mass and meals to be the automatic elixirs needed to get to know one another. How well do we know the people with whom we live? Is there a new poverty of relationships in the 21st century?

Key-words: relationship, commitment, mission, community.

Context

Before writing a word on the topic the two authors of this article must admit to our bias of “theology as a critical reflection upon praxis. The starting point for theology is engagement with people in their situation, which is where the Word of God is revealed.”¹ We incorporate a theology from below perspective, namely, beginning with actual experience and moving to authoritative endorsement.

Three Starting Points

The Judeo-Christian tradition begins with hospitality, with the vulnerability of Abraham to invite 3 strangers into his tent. All Abraham knows is that these three men are not of his tribe; they are strangers. Still, Abraham reaches out to the strangers². So begins Abraham and Sarah’s relationship with the divine.

¹ Mueller, JJ. Ed. *Theological Foundations: Concepts and Methods for Understanding Christian Faith*. Anselm Academic, (2001.), p. 333.

² Genesis 18: 1-8.

While De La Salle is still in his late 20's, "he decided to invite the school teachers into his own home for meals... In later years, it was this date that was selected to mark the foundation of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools by John Baptist de La Salle."³ Although these teachers were young, De La Salle was himself not yet thirty. He begins a relationship in which there is no turning back. The Institute begins with his invitation to the new schoolteachers.

The Rublev painting of the Trinity helps to identify that even the One God in whom we believe is a God of relationship. Three figures are sitting around an open table eating or drinking from the same vessel. No figure appears prominent over the other; the only distinguishing features are the colors of their garb. Their relationship is one of equality and openness.

At the very base of our religion, Lasallian tradition and belief in God is the web of relationship. Relationships are key, not just for our existence but also for the quality of our lives, and if we listen to De La Salle, the efficacy of our work.

From Inside the Family

Recently, I witnessed another group seated around an open table at a family reunion. An event like this is a wonderful opportunity to reconnect with loved ones you have not seen in a while as well as a time to deepen the bonds of love with those you see more regularly. Good food, something to drink, some communal games, and the squeals of little children help build the community of family. This kind of event is a sacrament of relationship, both the symbol of the reality and something that creates what it symbolizes.

While I was with my family I witnessed something that made me think about relationships in our technological age. What I observed raised some questions that have been spinning around in my head for a while.

My nieces and nephews, all twenty-somethings, were sitting around a table together with their boyfriends and girlfriends. As they sat there, they were not talking, they were not looking at each other, there was no laughter, they were not holding hands. I saw no star crossed lovers. Each of them had a smart phone in their hands and they seemed totally focused on their games, texting, Facebook, or Twitter - or so it seemed to me. I watched for a while then thought, how will they actually ever have children? What is the nature of their relationships? Is this how they experience their time together normally? Are they really present to one another?

Other Observations

Weeks later, I was at a restaurant with a friend. A couple sitting at the next table were repeating the experience of my nieces and nephews. There was no conversation, no observable warmth, and no obvious celebration of personal connection. Once again I began to wonder how the recently developed technologies have either enhanced or diminished the nature of our relationships. Has our connection to one another become digitalized and part of a virtual universe that makes a former understanding of human interconnectedness simply a relic from a different age and a reality our youth no longer experience? Is the very nature of human relationship in trouble? Are we witnessing a new poverty - our inability to be in direct, face-to-face - intimate connection with another human person who is physically present?

³ Salm, Luke. *The Work Is Yours: The Life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle*. Christian Brothers Publications, Romeoville, Illinois. (1989.), p. 34.

The same question rose yet again when a friend lost her husband. After the funeral, she withdrew and would not answer her phone, would not respond to any initiative to connect with family and friends. This went on for a few years not weeks or months. But, at the same time, she began to live on Facebook and Pinterest. What did the on-line experience provide that family and friends did not?

What about Technology?

Has our technology become a hiding place? Is it a refuge from the emotional engagement we inevitably face when proximity is not simply in our fingertips and keyboards but a more complete experience in which we can physically touch and smell another person present in shared space? Is there some dopamine released in our brains that creates an addiction to the computer, the Smartphone, the iPad that makes them more attractive than a living, human person who is sitting at the table with us or who is trying to reach out to us in moments of joy or grief?

Research has reached multiple and sometimes contradictory conclusions about the impact of modern social media technologies on human community and relationship. Current learning seems inconclusive about the value add or the diminishment these technologies have on our relationship experience. However, we have all witnessed people ignoring one another as they turn to their phone or laptop and maybe we have even done it ourselves.

Titles of research articles and blogs such as “*How to find true friends (and love) in 45 minutes*”⁴ speak of a perspective that might be part of modern day hope. When our day-to-day life does not satisfy, maybe there is the possibility that something “out there” will satisfy us, and we have the tools to help us find that satisfaction.

The expectation of instant intimacy is part of on-line dating services, chat rooms, Facebook, Twitter, and other similar internet tools and techno-experiences. Some people collect “friends” in venues such as Facebook in the same way people used to collect stamps or coins. Psychologically and socially it is impossible to creatively manage even 150 stable social relationships but now people have thousands of friends on line⁵. Do they really relate, really develop friendships and personal intimate association? What does having hundreds or even one thousand or more friends mean? Robert Dunbar’s research indicates it may mean nothing.

The way in which our social world is constructed is part and parcel of our biological inheritance. Together with apes and monkeys, we’re members of the primate family – and within the primates there is a general relationship between the size of the brain and the size of the social group. We fit in a pattern. There are social circles beyond it and layers within – but there is a natural grouping of 150.⁶

I don’t know what this means but I have some suspicions that the kinds of instant intimacy people are finding through social networking on-line might be an illusion rather than a reality. The drive for human intimacy, connection, love relationship, and the desire to know and be known is built into our DNA. We are social beings. Does the virtual reality that is now deeply imbedded in our daily experience enhance our ability to be in relationship or become a place to hide and avoid the psycho-emotional dimensions of relationships that simply cannot be turned off with a button when they become challenging?

⁴ David Rowan’s blog from 8 November 2011 and also featured in the 5 November 2011 issue of Time Magazine.

⁵ cf. <http://www.npr.org/2011/06/04/136723316/dont-believe-facebook-you-only-have-150-friends>

⁶ cf. <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2010/mar/14/my-bright-idea-robin-dunbar>

Sherry Turkle, psychologist, says that we are setting ourselves up for trouble because we are losing our capacity for self-reflection. We are learning to be alone together. She indicates that we can hide from each other even when we are in the same physical space together. While it seems, given social media, we can't get enough connection, young people are not gaining the skills required for face-to-face relationship. Social media gives us the illusion of control. We edit, delete or turn off. She uses the phrase "I share therefore I am". But relationships are much messier than this. The complexity of face-to-face relationship teaches us who we are at a deep level. In sustained intimate relationships we are challenged and because we are challenged we grow. Psychologist Turkle maintains that our devices do not only change what we do, but who we are. We have developed the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship⁷.

Robert Dunbar's assertion that "The lesson is that there is something computationally very demanding about maintaining close relationships over a very long period of time" would suggest that when you can simply click the switch and shut the relationship down for whatever reason there is no relationship but rather simply the illusion of relationship. There is no self reflection; there is no real connection, simply, what Turkle calls pretend empathy. While we have the ability to connect with everyone and everything, we are possibly becoming less connected to our very selves and thereby we diminish our capacity for real intimacy and human community.

...the popularity and instant appeal of the Internet has caused concern that individuals will become addicted to the Internet... withdraw from family relationships, experience increases in loneliness, and overall just find it impossible to reach deeper levels of intimacy in relationships. Psychologists are increasing the intensity of their studies regarding the Internet, finding this to be the case, while others disagree completely... Perhaps the 'Net is only another medium, not to be singled out, only another way that people can either benefit from it or be hurt by it, depending completely upon how they choose to use it, just as they do with any hobby, career, or lifestyle... [However] People are far more reclusive than they used to be, and the fact that social contact is necessary for human beings, collective organisms, shows that we as a societal whole have a sickness.⁸

Mission In A Technological Age

My experience with my nieces and nephews and my friend, my observations of couples in restaurants leads me to wonder about our mission to provide a human and Christian education especially for the poor. After many years of living and working in communities ravaged by intense poverty, I know that today even the poor in our country have access to cell phones and computers. What does providing a human and Christian education mean in the technological context in which we live? If, as De La Salle says, we are to be the Good Shepherd and the Guardian Angel to our students, we are called to a deep relationship with them. Pope Francis says the shepherd, if he or she is good, will smell like the sheep.

That is a call to intimacy. It is a call to deep relationship. It is a call to a deep sense of community, care, and compassion. If we allow ourselves to be subsumed into an on-line culture that tempts us to hide from the messiness of relationship and live with the illusion of instant intimacy, what do we have to teach our students? What do we model? Who do we become and what kind of community does our educational or ministerial institution become?

⁷ cf. Sherry Turkle: Connected, but alone? http://www.ted.com/talks/sherry_turkle_alone_together

⁸ cf. http://benturner.com/other/online_relationships.php

We can become so seduced by the ease of connecting with others online that we begin to think that these relationships are more intense, more committed and more complete than they really are. We run the risk of alienating the people who populate our daily lives in pursuit of intimacy with our online friends.⁹ 11

It might be a good thing for us to take a step back and reflect upon our own use of the technology of social media to ask how it is impacting “me” personally. It might be a good thing to evaluate the connections I have with my colleagues, with my family, with myself. If it is still true that these people actually matter because we share life together, then we must find ways to build stronger shared experiences, significant connections and deeper levels of intimacy for our own sake and the sake of our students who need to experience our unconditional love and acceptance. De La Salle tells us that our children “themselves are a letter which Christ dictates to you and which you write each day in their hearts, not with ink, but by the Spirit of the Living God.”¹⁰ We are called to intimacy. Unless we experience it and learn it in relationship we are personally impoverished and have no capacity to help our students walk through the experience. Where then are the human and the Christian dimension of the education we have been called to provide?

Lasallian Communities

Yes, as we look out of the window at the lack of eye to eye encounters, can we also allow for that same window to become a mirror? How do we Lasallians relate to one another in community?

In our Lasallian world we are fond of using words like “association” and “community.” And yes, we are quick to point out that our Founder associated us in order to run good schools and teach the poor gratuitously. Let there be no mistake about it, we are associated for Mission. In the words of Circular 461: “Association has never been an end in itself. It is ‘for the mission; with the clear purpose of giving a human and Christian education to ‘*children of the artisans and the poor*.’”¹¹ However, is it worthwhile to consider the affective health of each Lasallian or are we simply cogs in the wheels of fine institutions?

The community, then, does not live or exist or even think of itself except in relation to the mission. Community association will have value and meaning insofar as communities continue to be a response to the reality, needs and experience of young people, especially the poor. These communities will be close-knit, in solidarity with others, active and creative.¹²

Associated FOR...

Recently, I was at a memorial service honoring Brothers who had died over the past year. Three out of seven of the eulogists admitted to not knowing the deceased Brother very well. This admission was certainly not the first time that I had heard that opening line. Oftentimes, a community will ask either the Visitor or a layperson to eulogize a member of their community with whom the others have lived for years. Of course, there can be many reasons for someone other than a community member eulogizing the Brother. Sometimes, the reason could be that we do not know the people

⁹ cf. <http://www.socialmediaexaminer.com/4-ways-social-media-is-changing-your-relationships/>

¹⁰ cf. Meditations for the Time of Retreat 195.2.

¹¹ “Associated for the Lasallian Mission...an act of HOPE.” Circular 461. General Council—Rome, Italy. Brothers of the Christian Schools, (September, 2010.), p. 40.

¹² Echeverria, “Pastoral Letter. Consecrated by God the Trinity, as a community of Brothers, to make visible his gratuitous and supportive love.” (December 25, 2007) Rome: Generalate, p. 9.

that we live with. Recently, a friend quoted Voltaire as saying: “Religious are the only group of people who live together for 50 years and yet, not a tear is shed at one another’s funeral.”

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Initial Formation and Community

As scholastics, we had a weekly “community living session” where community members could bring up how life in the community, in school, in general, was going. On this one particular Sunday evening, a number of members of the community were thanking one another for: helping with the dishes, folding clothes that were in the dryer, being considerate, etc. After a number of comments were given, the sub-director broke in with a severe rebuke. We were reminded that there were other guys our age fighting in Viet Nam; thousands of civilians die in wars; in other parts of the world not in war torn areas there were even greater numbers of children who were battling starvation; many in the world who longed to get an education did not have the means of doing so. How could we scholastics be so self-centered as to think that these common courtesies were important? As religious, we needed to pull our heads out of our navels and take a look at the real world of need all around us. The world was bigger than our own little concerns.

I can remember that amongst other emotions, most of us did feel embarrassed for our shortsighted concerns. And, this intervention did make a difference in the way that we approached community living from then on. However, what I also remember is this very sub-director left us at the end of the semester to marry a woman with whom he fell in love. As Lasallians, it’s true, we are to keep our interest in the world at large, with a “preferential option for the poor” but at the same time, can we value the healthy relationships that bolster us in our work and life?

Building Bridges...or Walls

Fortunately, the old idea of “the male mystique” has changed over the past few decades. Few of us today would point to the “Lone Ranger” idea of getting through life alone as optimal. As mentioned earlier, even the God in whom we believe is represented in a relationship of the Trinity. This is why we form communities. A common roof does not make a community; trust, knowledge, faith, vulnerability and a common concern for one another, does make for community.

Pope Francis, writes:

The individualism of our postmodern and globalized era favors a lifestyle which weakens the development and stability of personal relationships and distorts family bonds. Pastoral activity needs to bring out more clearly the fact that our relationship with the Father demands and encourages a communion which heals, promotes and reinforces interpersonal bonds. In our world, especially in some countries, different forms of war and conflict are re-emerging, yet we Christians remain steadfast in our intention to respect others, to heal wounds, to build bridges, to strengthen relationships and to “bear one another’s burdens” (Gal 6:2).¹³

Appropriately, the Pope has been given the century’s old title of *Pontifex Maximus*, the Great Bridge Builder. Whether the story is about feeding a member of the Swiss Guard, washing the feet of a Muslim woman or finding commonalities with non-Catholics and atheists, this Pope has lived into his title. But he is also known for having good friends who know him well and love him, and

¹³ Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel: Evangelii Gaudium*. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, (December 13, 2013.) #67.

he them. He calls them on the phone; they make him shoes; men and women come to visit him, not as pope, but as friend. How interesting; how normal; how healthy!

Our Treasure Trove

Our Lasallian communities have such opportunities! Whether we live in an all-Brother community or with other Lasallians, each and every other one of those lives is a story worth hearing and telling. But do our communities ever get together to hear about one another? Oftentimes, some of us expect that when we participate in mass and meals together then we automatically get to know one another. On some level, this may be true for strangers. But when we live with one another day after day, perhaps there needs to be more intentionality in what we share. For example, my experience at mass and community prayers is that when we have prayers of petition we can count on the same prayers from the same people. One member always prays for peace in the Middle East, another for our affiliates and benefactors, another for persons with AIDS and yet another for our students seeking jobs. Because of the regularity of the specific prayer by the specific brother, there is rarely much self-revelation, let alone faith sharing, in this kind of prayer.

Former Superior, Brother Alvaro writes in his pastoral letter to the Brothers in 2007:

As I said in my first words after the election, the topic that awakened the most interest among the capitulants was that of fraternal life in community. We felt an urgent need to renew our community life, to make it more Gospel-centered, to unite our strengths and gifts for the service of the mission... A community that implies living intensely our interior lives on a personal level...the community should be for the Brother the theological place of the encounter with God...¹⁴

Anyone familiar with both Brother Alvaro and the Institute understands that this emphasis on community is one of both/and rather than either/or. Both being associated for the mission AND paying close attention to those with whom we serve. In this regard, I think we may make a common assumption that simply living together implies living together well. Let's take another example of a *quid pro quo* assumption.

The Greatest Commandment

When Jesus is asked what the greatest commandment is He gives us the well-known greatest commandments:

You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.¹⁵

For some who read the second commandment there is an assumption that everyone loves themselves, therefore, "love others as we love ourselves." But is the assumption that most of us "love ourselves" an accurate assumption? Does everyone have a genuine love of self? In fact, most people I know, especially most students, have a long way to go in genuinely loving themselves. Jesus' words give us further wisdom in citing the two commandments with a primary and secondary importance. Maybe we should follow Jesus' lead of emphasis and state that we are "associated for mission" first and commit ourselves to our community members second.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 12-13.

¹⁵ Matthew 22: 37-40

We also hear in the gospel of John: “This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”¹⁶ So how do we actually do this? I believe the best place to start is to hear one another’s stories.

A community with which I am familiar meets once a month specifically to tell their stories to one another. They divide their stories into four parts: 1) Mission 2) Community 3) Spirituality 4) Me. One or two of the community members creates questions about one of the parts of the story. The discussion about part 4 used the following to get started:

- I am the son of _____.
- Here is a little of what growing up in my family was like _____
- I joined the brothers (the Lasallian Family) because _____
- I have remained because _____
- One thing I have learned about myself through my relationships with my closest friends is _____
- Now that I am a senior, one thing I would like those younger than me to know is _____

There were eight members of the community and each shared his story. Some had known one another for 40 years and never knew a thing about family, hardship, privilege, obstacles overcome, etc. Each community member who attended was given the questions ahead of time. No one was forced to attend. Hearing each others’ stories made a difference in how we saw each other. Respect, trust, generosity toward one another only grew.

A New Poverty

Just a couple months ago, I emailed a Brother that I have known my entire time with the Institute. I knew he wasn’t feeling that well and I not only wanted to pay him a visit, I also wanted him to share his oral history with me. He had previously told me “that could be fun.” I did not hear back from Marvin for a few weeks. Soon after, we received notice that Brother Marvin was in ICU where he passed away peacefully. I was not as peaceful as Marvin. I knew that there was so much for the rest of us to know about this Brother who for so many years was the “custodian” of La Salle Institute in Glencoe, Missouri, committed to the poor and always went wherever he was asked to go. I am, we are, poorer for not knowing more of him.

I am bolstered and richer with each community member’s story and depleted and poorer when any person’s story escapes my attention.

Once again, from Pope Francis:

The Christian ideal will always be a summons to overcome suspicion, habitual mistrust, fear of losing our privacy, all the defensive attitudes which today’s world imposes on us. Many try to escape from others and take refuge in the comfort of their privacy or in a small circle of close friends, renouncing the realism of the social aspect of the Gospel. For just as some people want a purely spiritual Christ, without flesh and without the cross, they also want their interpersonal relationships provided by sophisticated equipment, by screens and systems which can be turned on and off on command. Meanwhile, the Gospel tells us constantly to run the risk of a face-to-face encounter with others, with their physical presence which challenges us, with their pain and their pleas, with their joy which infects us in our close and continuous interaction. True faith in the incarnate Son of God is

¹⁶ John 13:35

inseparable from self-giving, from membership in the community, from service, from reconciliation with others. The Son of God, by becoming flesh, summoned us to the revolution of tenderness.¹⁷

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Within each and every Lasallian community there is a storehouse of riches packed away in each of our stories. We are engaged in a noble work, followers of St. John Baptist de La Salle, yes. We are also called “Human Beings” rather than “Human Doings.” Each one of us will be just a little less poor when treated with another community member’s story. Will we be enriched, or become a victim of a new poverty of the 21st century?

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¹⁷ Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel: Evangelii Gaudium*. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, (December 13, 2013.) #88.