

REMEMBERING THE FUTURE: ADVANCING THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY IN MISSION THROUGH FORMATION FOR MEMORY

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ABSTRACT

The Lasallian theory of education is a system of pedagogy, curriculum, and school management that is rooted in the spirituality and ministerial vision of St. John Baptist de La Salle. As originally conceived, this system depended on a new and unique religious community structure to ensure not only the proper formation of its practitioners, but also to ensure its intended design and character. This paper examines the question: as new generations of Lasallian educators who cannot or do not associate through the original community structure assume responsibility for this design and character, what adverse effects could this have on the system and how can they be addressed? The goals of this examination are (1) to survey the major historical developments in Lasallian spirituality and ministry as they relate to the question; (2) to state the problem that the gradual loss of this community life poses for the continued authenticity of Lasallian educational praxis; and (3) to propose an approach to Lasallian formation based on connecting current Lasallians to the collective Lasallian memory in order to preserve the dynamics of association for mission that are essential to the character of Lasallian ministries.

Key words: community, association for mission, collective Lasallian memory, Lasallian imagination, Lasallian idea, Lasallian foundational charism, Lasallian generative charism.

Introduction: A Question of Function and Form

It's like everyone tells a story about themselves inside their own head. Always. All the time. That story makes you what you are. We build ourselves out of that story.

Patrick Rothfuss

In the field of architecture, a long-standing maxim is the phrase “form follows function”. Following a particular school of thought within the field, the phrase expresses the idea that the form that a particular structure takes ideally stems from its envisioned use by people. While the original context for this thinking was the aesthetics of constructing physical edifices, it can have broader and equally

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useful applications. For example, consider that architecture, the process of designing how something will fit together and then building it so that it will work as intended, can accurately describe not only creating buildings but also anything that has a structure meant to serve a particular purpose. Further, consider that the dictum of form following function likewise has this same generic quality. In this understanding, an architect and the architect's work can be to erect a skyscraper. Or to design a legal system. Or to fashion a genre of music. Or to found a revolutionary way of educating children.

In 1680, St. John Baptist de La Salle committed himself to the establishment of his Christian schools because he saw education as an relevant and practical way to respond to the needs of his society's most marginalized and at-risk members. However, it was De La Salle's particular genius for holistic thinking that resulted in his most distinctive and transforming insight: education is not primarily a system of instructional processes or techniques but is primarily a web of human relationships. This would drive the design of his schools, the method of his instruction, and, most significantly, the role of his teachers.

There is much in Lasallian thought to suggest that, like most of his contemporaries, De La Salle's understood that at the center of education must be the person of the teacher. In their relationships – to God, to their work, and to one another – would live both the model and the impulse for everything that his schools should be and could become. It was a notion of intentional association that would necessitate the creation of a unique structure that could serve a unique dynamic. In time, through both the vision of its founder and the lived experience of its first participants, the structure would arrive, and it would transform both religious orders and educational institutions into what they had to be for the sake of the people who needed them. Form following function.

The central assumption of this study is the necessity of this particular structure and experience to the definitive ethos and dynamic of Lasallian education. The central problem that this study will address is the gradual dissipation of this structure and its influence within the modern Lasallian network of ministries. The questions that will be raised are, first, if the practice of education as De La Salle envisioned it relied on *the total community life experience* of the Brothers to be the schools' central defining and animating force, what impact could the gradual loss of that experience be having on the optimal function of Lasallian ministry? Second, if the experience that uniquely served to provide the distinctive character of Lasallian education becomes largely unavailable to Lasallian educators, then what are the challenges and opportunities for maintaining the Lasallian mission in its *raison d'être*? The goal of this work, then, is to propose viable answers to both questions, offered not definitively but prospectively, as invitations to conversation and investigation and adaptation.

A major contention that will underlie this study is that the Lasallian family now finds itself standing at a historical crossroads that is not at all new to the Lasallian story and yet is one with which the latest generation of Lasallians may be largely unfamiliar. Understanding what is involved for the Lasallian family at this time in negotiating both its ordinary and its extraordinary crossroads and choosing a next step – as not only a present practical direction but also as a potential movement of re-founding – will require, first, examining the relevant historical record; second, applying the most appropriate theoretical framework; third, delving into the resulting problems and questions; and, fourth, offering the best ideas and conclusions that the process suggests.

Finally, an author's note. As with any work of this type, there will be inherent academic and editorial limits. Among them are the inability of modern researchers to know the exact mind of De La Salle in regard to the intricacies of his own educational-ministerial theories, and, similarly, the inability to always objectively distinguish moments of great insight and intentional innovation from those of random experimentation and mere coincidence. There also will be this particular study's limited

space and its author's limited expertise in managing the complexities of over three centuries of Lasallian historical developments.

Author's Lenses: The Lasallian Movement in the United States Today

It is necessary to note that the author's lived frame of reference in regard to the Lasallian movement is almost exclusively that of experiences of the Lasallian family within the United States of America, and so this will be the context for this work. The author's initial experience of the Lasallian family in the United States was rooted, and essentially remains, in the schools and culture of the American southwest. Over the course of many years, this journey has expanded to include significant experiences of the American south, the American far west and northwest, and, to a lesser extent, the American midwest. In examining these diverse experiences, it can be seen that, no matter where and how distinctively they exist, Lasallian ministries and communities are subject to the same socio-cultural trends in regard to their activity and sustainability. Currently, there are three separate yet closely-related phenomena that particularly influence the author's overall perspective on what are the primary challenges and opportunities facing the Lasallian family in the United States today.

First, there is the impact of the state of vocations in the United States. Between the years 1985 and 2012, the number of priests in the United States fell by approximately 32%, the number of religious brothers, including De La Salle Brothers, fell by approximately 50%, the number of religious sisters fell by approximately 53%, and the number of Catholic elementary and high schools fell by approximately 50%. This as the United States Catholic population grew almost 21% from 45.6 to 66.3 million (cf. CARA, 2012). However, it must be noted that, during this same period, the number of Lasallian schools fell only 18%. Diminishing numbers of vocations to the Brothers' life have not resulted so far in a commensurate disappearance of Lasallian schools in the United States, suggesting that the schools are somehow adapting in order to ensure the life of their mission.

Second, there is the evolving role of the Lasallian Partner in Lasallian ministries. In the United States, many current and former teachers, as well as former students, can remember when the presence of a "Lay" teacher on a Christian Brothers' school faculty was considered exceptional, perhaps even risky. Today, Lasallian Partners make up the majority of most Lasallian school faculties and even administrations. Perhaps most significant is the number of both male and female Partners serving as school presidents, principals, first-tier administrators, and governance trustees. Given the traditional leadership responsibilities in a Lasallian school – fidelity to mission and identity through transmission of charism and heritage – this development signals not only a shift in personnel demographics but in the fundamental character of Lasallian school administration and stewardship.

Finally, there is the fundamental challenge of mission efficacy. In the United States, this presents itself most consistently in two hallmark mission areas: accessibility and evangelization. As the Lasallian family in America struggles with ways to address the on-going tension between its commitment to ensuring its schools' accessibility and responsiveness to all and its responsibility to ensuring its schools' financial and human resource sustainability, it also must search for how most creatively and powerfully to maintain its schools' Gospel vision and purpose in the face of increasingly secularized social priorities and agendas. In recent years, internal Lasallian culture measurements such as the Catholic Lasallian Assessment Program (CLASP) have been developed in response to a growing consciousness that previously innate Lasallian leadership mindsets and dispositions now require an externally structured and systemic intentionality to guarantee their presence and vitality.

The relevance of these observations to the purpose of this work lies in their common theme of the changing landscape of Lasallian association for mission as it impacts modern interpretations of what it means for a person or an institution to be Lasallian today. Interpreting and reinterpreting Lasallian practice for successive generations and situations has been necessary throughout the existence of the Lasallian movement. However, it must be acknowledged that this is seldom without risk. The immanent danger is that a combination of felt urgency to adapt in order to preserve the mission and an incomplete memory of what constitutes and fixes the mission can, in fact, confuse or even corrupt how the Lasallian charism is understood or represented. Faithful interpretations and translations depend on a complete awareness of where and how the charism finds its authentic character. Historically, this comes from the vision and purpose of Lasallian association.

Lasallian Imagination: Perspectives on the Vision and Purpose of Association

In a word, to let the spiritual, the unbidden and the unconscious rise up through the common.

William Henry Channing

The architect Frank Lloyd Wright once said, "An idea is salvation by imagination." For St. John Baptist de La Salle, salvation looked like people living in the awareness of God's love for them and experiencing a life of dignity and meaning. What he imagined was a place where that would happen and the kind of person that such an effort would require. How he proceeded to do this set in motion a stream of innovations and principles that together would form and guide the beginnings of what would become the Lasallian mission.

For De La Salle, imagination seemed to take two forms. There was the vision that emerged from his imagination, taking what was and merging it into a faith-driven conviction of what should be: a transformed and new reality for its participants. Then, there was an understanding of why this new reality must come to be: its purpose as a fulfillment of God's plan of salvation for his people and his realized presence as a healed and healing world for all, especially for those who were most vulnerable and most in need.

The roots of what would emerge as the vision and purpose of Lasallian association can be characterized as four basic religious assumptions that De La Salle held about the nature and meaning of human existence. These religious convictions dominated his worldview and shaped his personality, their frequent mention in De La Salle's own writings seeming to suggest a prominence both in his spirituality and in his design for how and why his teachers would form communities that ultimately would constitute the Brothers of the Christian Schools and the Lasallian movement. These assumptions will be referred to as the Presence and Providence of God, means to fulfill God's Salvific Plan, and the Gratuitous Proximity of Salvation to the Human Condition.

The Presence and Providence of God

It is no overstatement to say that the single most important element of Lasallian spirituality is attention to the presence and activity of God in the world and the lives of persons. On April 7, 1719, as he lay dying, St. John Baptist de La Salle said to one of the Brothers at his bedside, "I adore in all things the guidance of God in my regard." (Blain 3, p. 738) These last words of De La Salle would serve to illustrate the circle of his life, a flow of faith, devotion, and zeal in perpetual service of a God who was always there and always calling.

The real presence and providence of God was a theme that was repeated throughout De La Salle's writings, with emphasis shifting depending upon the context of the occasion or the particular virtue upon which he was insisting. When the focus was interior disposition, the emphasis would fix on a simple attention to presence.

You nourish the life of your soul with God's life by being occupied with his holy presence as much as you are able. What characterizes the life of the saints is their continual attention to God; this ought also to be true of souls consecrated to God, who seek only to do his holy will, to love him, and to cause him to be loved by others (MD 67.1).

If the focus was more on apostolic disposition, the emphasis might be to appeal to the activities of community and ministry.

To you especially Jesus Christ addresses these words of today's Gospel: Seek first the kingdom of God. You ought not to have come to this community except to seek here the reign of God: first, for you, and second, for those whose instruction God has entrusted to you. Here you ought to seek only to establish this reign of God within your soul, both in this life and in the next (MD 67.1).

In regard to Providence, emphasis would often be placed on the action of God breaking into the human condition through persons who, having been made aware of the condition's brokenness, were now inextricably connected to it, not as victims, but as agents of grace.

Such is the plight of those whom Providence calls upon you to teach and whom you must train in piety. God has led them to you; God makes you responsible for their salvation; God gives you the responsibility to provide for all their spiritual needs. To do this ought to be your constant effort (MD 37.1).

What should be noted is that, for De La Salle, the shifting emphasis from one aspect of this apostolic spirituality to another was precisely that: a collection of different perspectives of the whole. There was to be no separation or compartmentalization of the interior and exterior person or of the work of the holy and the work of the profane. In pondering the mystery of the Incarnation, De La Salle realized that to believe that God and his creation are one was to accept that one cannot go to God except through his creation, and that the path that Christ had carved for all to follow went intentionally and especially through the world of the poor.

...De La Salle experienced in his prayer a double contemplation. On the one hand, he contemplated the goodness and awesome power of the divine will that everyone should be saved; on the other, he contemplated first-hand the situation of the neglected children of the poor, far from salvation, as he perceived them to be. Their poverty and ignorance were a barrier to their salvation as children of God in this world; their street vices a barrier to eternal life with God in the next world. He knew that it would not be enough to lead the neglected children of the poor to hope for salvation in the next world if something wasn't done to give them some hope of fulfillment in this world (Salm, 1999).

It is hard to find in any of De La Salle's words to others about ministry that do not in some way eventually gravitate to the still point of his immersion in his relationship with God. In fact, there is little to suggest that any of De La Salle's religious practices other than attention to God's presence or abandonment to God's providence either held greater importance in his life or would hold a more prominent place in the spirituality and the movement that would come to bear his name.

The Sacredness of Human Work as the Means to Fulfill God's Salvific Plan

With the intense experience of God's presence and providence forming the core of his personal spirituality, De La Salle would live in a continual search for how he could put himself at one with the God who had reached so deeply into his heart. As first a canon and then priest, he certainly had made the connection between doing God's work and doing the work of the Church. In time, however, he would discover that the sanctity of work did not come from the state of the minister or institutions but from the spirit of God that animated and accompanied it. With such a quality, all work was sacred and its transcendent character established the context within which the work took on its true meaning and value. It was up to the worker to cooperate in this mystical adventure. De La Salle would convey this insight in his instructions to his early followers.

The zeal that ought to inspire you is meant to give you these dispositions, so that you recognize that it is God who has called you, who has destined you for this work, and who has sent you to labor in his vineyard. Do this, then, with all the affection of your heart, working entirely for him (MTR 201.1).

There was more to De La Salle's discovery. A second insight was that it was from this sacred character that both work and worker drew their dignity.

This is also what ought to engage you to have an altogether special esteem for the Christian instruction and education of children, because it is a means to help them become true children of God and citizens of heaven. This is the very foundation and support of their piety and of all the other good that takes place in the Church (MTR 199.3).

Still another insight, perhaps the most significant to De La Salle's understanding of the nature of God's redemptive action in people's everyday lives and trials, was the interdependence of human work and divine salvation.

Do not make any distinction 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 and that you will never acquire greater perfection than by fulfilling well the duties of your state, provided you do so with a view to accomplishing God's will. (R 78)

De La Salle had experienced that not only did God effect redemption in an imperfect and often resistant world, but that he chose to do so through its most unlikely agents and unexpected means. What might be viewed in theological terms as unworthy of God was actually how God preferred to come to his own. Paradoxically, while any human efforts apart from God were most assuredly futile, even the most primitive of human efforts were, if with God, fertile and blessed. These varied observations would coalesce to reshape De La Salle's mind in regard to how he viewed his own religious vocation, both as it defined him and also as it related to what he wanted to do with his life. However, it would take an unexpected and eye-opening encounter in his own home to truly realize where God was leading him.

The Imperative to Participate in God's Justice

In 1681, De La Salle made the now infamous decision to bring the early vagabond teachers that he was attempting to train into his home. (Blain 1, CL p. 185) For him, it was a practically necessary and divinely willed act, one that, in spite of opposition from family and friends, he felt prepared to manage. However, it would lead De La Salle to a place that, even in his great faith and virtue, he apparently found hard to believe really could be what God had in mind.

Initially De La Salle tried to work with his teachers by guiding them while maintaining his intention of only a temporary involvement. For this, he would be brought up short by the men themselves on an occasion when he attempted to silence their anxieties over the total insecurity of their thread-bare situation. His pious and sterile lecture on their lack of faith drew a stiletto-like rebuke.

You speak with inspiration amid your ease, for you lack nothing. You have a rich canonry and an equally fine inheritance... The ruin of our enterprise would not affect you. We own nothing... Destitution will be our only portion and begging our only means to relieve it. (Blain 1, CL p. 188).

It was because of this most human and earnest of moments that De La Salle began to see clearly that anyone who seeks union with God must join him in standing in the midst of the world's wounded heart without reservation and as one of its own.

In the light of the Gospel, he had a sort of prophetic vision that hope for salvation was being offered to the poor through this little group of men who had so boldly challenged him. He became aware also that the fulfillment of this hope would depend on the consent he would give to an exile without return, to an adventure based on the Gospel, to his incarnation within the world of the poor (Sauvage, p. 237).

Through that first group of teachers, De La Salle would travel the bridge to those with whom God wanted him to be, and he would come to know them well, able to introduce them to others as one who held them in his heart, which he now did.

Because you are under the obligation to instruct the children of the poor, you must, consequently, cultivate a very special tenderness for them and procure their spiritual welfare as far as you will be able, considering them as members of Jesus Christ and his well-beloved. The faith that must inspire you ought to make you honor Jesus Christ in their person and prefer them to the wealthiest children on earth, because they are the living images of Jesus Christ, our divine Master (MD 80.3).

As De La Salle's own conversion progressed, so, too, did his ability to articulate those virtues and actions that were needed to enter into the landscape of God's ignored and forgotten children. He exhorts his disciples to look and around only through the "eyes of faith", insisting that to attempt God's work in any other way would be futile self-deception, if not dangerous denial. (R 32). It is interesting to consider to what degree De La Salle's attachment to this metaphor, today such an iconic image of the Lasallian disposition, had its tempering, if not its actual origin, in what Sauvage labels the "founding shock" of the collision of De La Salle's and God's world. (Sauvage, p. 231 ff) In any case, there is ample reason to conclude that, for De La Salle, the notion of God's healing being achieved through decorous and patronizing works of mercy fell absurdly short of both the profundity of the need and the desperation for a response. Eventually, his writings would express this in the bluntest of terms.

Let it be clear, then, in all your conduct toward the children who are entrusted to you, that you regard yourselves as the ministers of God, carrying out your ministry with love and a sincere and true zeal, accepting with much patience the difficulties you have to suffer, willing to be despised by men and to be persecuted, even to give your life for Jesus in the fulfillment of your ministry. (MTR 201.1)

It might be said that De La Salle's growing awareness of his society's coldness toward the poor and their lot in life was very likely the tipping point in his own conversion, the ignition of a previously absent moral outrage and the point at which it became clear to him that there could be no turning back.

The Gratuitous Proximity of Salvation to the Human Condition

A key product of De La Salle's overwhelming sense of the presence of God and religious formation was an absolute confidence in the nearness of God to his people and vice versa. In spite of 17th century spirituality's basically negative view of human existence in the face of an omnipotent and exacting God, there also were movements afoot that affirmed access to God's overwhelming love. Exposed to all of the various "schools" of European spiritual thought of the day, De La Salle would work to reconcile and synthesize those strains with his self-reflective view of his relationship with God. (Rodrigue, p. 3 ff)

In particular, it was the idea of how God's providential outreach showed how the distance between divine love and human suffering could be healed by the human response to God's grace – and that this response, again, could travel a vertical path by taking a horizontal direction – that De La Salle would embrace in his own unique way. Just as the ministry of Jesus broke into history with good news for the *anawim* (afflicted) of his time, so De La Salle understood that his ministry could break into society with good news for its outcasts and hopeless. What he considered to be critical was that there be people who would allow themselves to be used to complete the providential outreach, to both be and provide that point where God and his poor could meet. He soon sought to locate and form those people.

God wills not only that all come to the knowledge of truth but also that all be saved. He cannot truly desire this without providing the means for it and, therefore, without giving children the teachers who will assist them in the fulfillment of his plan. This, says Saint Paul, is the field that God cultivates, the building that he is raising, and you are the ones whom he has chosen to help in this work by announcing to these children the Gospel of his Son and the truths that are contained in it. (MTR 193.3)

It would be in the person of the teacher that children would encounter the human face and heart of God. And it would be De La Salle's schools that would be God's announcement to the children and their families that such teachers were gathered to be God's ambassadors for redemption by giving a human and Christian education to all, especially those most in need.

Consider that it is a practice only too common for working people and the poor to allow their children to live on their own, roaming all over like vagabonds, as long as they are unable to put them to some work. These parents have no concern to send their children to school, because their poverty does not allow them to pay teachers, or else, obliged as they are to look for work outside the home, they have to abandon their children to fend for themselves...God has had the goodness to remedy so great a misfortune by the establishment of the Christian Schools, where the teaching is offered free of charge and entirely for the glory of God, where the children are kept all day, learn reading, writing, and their religion, and are always busy, so that when their parents want them to go to work, they are prepared for employment. (MR 194.1)

In De La Salle's view, it was not only possible but necessary to merge into one all of the different strands of human experience in order to reveal their true and redeeming unity in Christ. In the case of God and the human condition, his desire was to incorporate this view into a way of doing ministry that emphasized the centrality of human relationships and an explicit dedication to the salvation of souls through every ordinary as well as extraordinary aspect of the work at hand. (Sauvage and Campos, p.13) What was clear to him was that God was present for the purpose of being available and that his presence was an invitation into healing, wholeness, and fulfillment. Further, it would be the character of De La Salle's ministries to cooperate with this reality by being its mirror and its doorway.

Lasallian Idea: Perspectives on the School and the Crucible of the Brothers Community

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"It is the essence of genius to make use of the simplest ideas."

Charles Peguy

If the qualities and the interplay of four basic religious assumptions produced a view of God and the world that would stand as De La Salle's inspired imagination, later to be known as the "Founder's charism", then what followed was its practical and, in many ways, radical articulation, a transformational concept that would take the shape of a re-visioned rationale for and way of providing for the education of children. This "Lasallian idea" would have three distinctive and innovative forms: the Forming of a New Apostolic Mission, the Forming of a New Community in Association for the Mission, and the Formation of a New Christian School Conducted for the Mission.

The Forming of a New Apostolic Mission

The story of the Lasallian mission begins with an initial impulse that, to this day, remains the mission's main imperative: reading the signs of the times and meeting needs.

The necessity of this Institute is very great because the working class and the poor, being usually little instructed and occupied all day in gaining a livelihood for themselves and their children, cannot give them the instruction they need and a respectable and Christian education. Persons are therefore needed to take the place of fathers and mothers to instruct children in the mysteries of religion that they ought to know and in the elementary practices of the Christian life. It was to procure this advantage for the children of the working class and of the poor that the Christian Schools were established. (RFD p. 14)

In crafting how best to act on what he saw around him, De La Salle quickly realized that there was much that was available to him by way of existing works and approaches, but that none of them completely addressed all of his four assumptions together. Of special importance to him was what today is referred to as a "mission-driven" approach, or one in which an overarching creative end determines, animates, and critiques the various logistical means chosen to achieve it. In the case of De La Salle and his mission, the end was clear.

That which is of utmost importance, and to which the greatest attention should be given in an Institute, is that all who compose it possess the spirit peculiar to it (RFD p. 16)... The spirit of this Institute is, first, a spirit of faith, which ought to induce those who compose it not to look upon anything but with the eyes of faith, not to do anything but in view of God (RFD 16)...

The spirit of this Institute consists, secondly, in an ardent zeal for the instruction of children and for bringing them up in the fear of God, inducing them to preserve their innocence if they have not lost it and inspiring them with a great aversion and a very great horror for sin and for all that could cause them to lose purity. (RFD p. 18)

The spirit of faith and zeal would be the mission's foundation and, therefore, its most non-negotiable imperative. For De La Salle, there could be no mission relevance, no mission success, outside of this spirit. In centering his work on realizing the transformation of lives through assuming responsibility for communicating the presence and activity of God, De La Salle was suggesting a fundamental shift in the known ministerial and educational paradigm.

While it is true that, in many respects, the notion of providing students with a well-organized and dignified religious education was neither original nor unique (take, for example, the Little Schools

(*Les Petites Écoles*) of Jean Duvergier de Hauranne and others), the holistic and egalitarian character of this mission was a different and perhaps even revolutionary direction, one that suggested the possibility of a changed way of seeing and being in the world for the sake of others. And it would suggest a certain vehicle in which this character was to find both life and expression.

The Forming of a New Community in Association for the Mission

One of the strongest aspects of the Lasallian idea is that it places at least as high a priority on the who as on the what of the Lasallian mission. De La Salle's belief in the centrality of human relationships as the embodiment of divine love and creative possibility would lead to his identification of community as the primary means by which the mission would live. What would be necessary was a unified effort of an entire body persons committed not simply to the task of teaching but to the challenge of reinventing education so that it would speak incarnationally to the minds and souls of the young. Attempting this with separate and even disparate persons, particularly if the goal was together to grasp and embody the unifying experience of God's redemptive presence, simply would not work.

Central of the success of the Lasallian enterprise was the community of teachers who called themselves by the name Brother. The community provided an element of stability and continuity, as well as a process of growth that came from shared experience and experimentation with new educational methods. (Salm, p. 52)

This would be a different kind of religious community, one formed not around ecclesial status or function, but around consecration to a dialectical and eschatological mission.

It was undoubtedly De La Salle's essential charism to grasp the need and to work effectively to meet it. He was able to organize a community and create the practical conditions required for its existence as a stable entity. In particular, it was his determination to dedicate his community wholly to the effective service of poor and abandoned youngsters that chiefly explained the decision initially taken, and then vigorously asserted and defended by the Founder and the first Brothers, of having all the members without exception remain laymen. The evangelical service of the poor thus gave rise to a new type of religious society. (Sauvage and Campos p. 68)

The community would be for the Brothers the way in which they would be present in and to God's own work, as angels and ambassadors. (Sauvage and Campos, p. 137 ff) It would be the way in which they were present in and throughout their schools, as both lesson-giver and lesson. (Poutet, p.73) Finally, it would be the way in which they would be in and for their students.

Since you are ambassadors and ministers of Jesus Christ in the work that you do, you must act as representing Jesus Christ himself. He wants your disciples to see him in you and receive your teaching as if he were teaching them. They must be convinced that the truth of Jesus Christ comes from your mouth, that it is only in his name that you teach, that he has given you authority over them. They are a letter which Christ dictates to you, which you write each day in their hearts, not with ink, but by the Spirit of the living God... (MR 195.2)

Above all, the key characteristic of the Lasallian community is that it exists for the mission and that it serves the mission by embodying it. Again, the animating force of the mission is human relationships, and the community is where the relational dynamic that is authentic to the spirit of the mission traditionally and ideally is learned, cultivated, and stewarded, and from where it is announced, initiated, and grown.

It is a bond of solidarity between persons, and for that reason, makes them dependent on each other. It is no longer a case of “taking part in but belonging to”, “depending on”, or even better, “being interdependent”. This is what creates the Association. The sign of commitment of each member makes the sign of the community more visible...The community is inseparable from its purpose and finds its justification in this. Commitment to the community reinforces the sign of its way of service to attain that purpose: the evangelization of abandoned youth through education. (Botana p. 125)

The community’s “way of service” would be an easily recognizable and familiar institution in De La Salle’s society. What would prove to be less recognizable and familiar was the vision that it would embrace and the approach that it would take.

The Formation of a New Christian School Conducted for the Mission

In De La Salle’s fertile imagination, the ministry that he recognized as most suited to be the bricks and mortar of his mission would be the school. If the community functioned as the crucible of this idea, then the school would be where its contents would be tested and put to use. It would be an innovative and symbiotic enterprise, where those served and those who served would accompany one another in a journey of learning and grace.

The foundation dynamism of the Institute is to put the means of salvation within the reach of abandoned youth. For that end, there is the “liberating” action of the Founder and his Brothers, who stubbornly ensure the gratuity of instruction, who transform their school so that it may be acceptable to youth through education and be for them an experience of human dignity, of solidarity and friendship – a school which prepares them for a useful competent life of service. (Sauvage, p. 289)

For De La Salle, educating children toward a life-long stance of dignity and integrity in response to the world’s inhumanity would be the overriding goal of his schools. Whereas much of 17th century educational theory barely acknowledged the student’s affective life – viewing it mainly in terms of how to prevent it from impacting the classroom – De La Salle would insist that no meaningful education could take place apart from meeting students’ human needs. While his schools focused on preparing students to find their place as successful members of society, they simultaneously focused on forming them to come to realize their place as wanted and important members of God’s creation.

They need good teachers, like visible angels, watchful guides to inspire them and lead them on the path of salvation, guides who have an adequate understanding both of what God expects of young people, and of their ordinary faults... (MTR 197.1)

Together, De La Salle and the Brothers would craft an approach that was uniquely adapted to the task of both directing and accompanying their disciples. They brought to them an experience of life organized around not who the students had come to believe they were, but who they had been created to be. The Brothers were there to deliver good news and be its animators, affirming through the structures and practices of the school day every student’s worth and promise.

It is your duty to go up to God every day in prayer to learn from him all that you must teach the children and then to come down to them by accommodating them at their level in order to instruct them about what God has communicated for them to you in your prayer, as well as in Holy Scripture, which contains the truths of religion and the maxims of the holy Gospel... It is your duty, then, to admonish the unruly and to do this in such a way that they give up their former way of life; you must rouse up those who lack courage, support the weak, and be patient toward all. (MTR 198.2)

Recognizing that a primary problem with those good schools that did exist at the time was their lack of accessibility to those who needed them most, De La Salle’s schools would be maintained as

gratuitous schools. This lack of access had both temporal and spiritual ramifications for the students, a reality that De La Salle intuitively realized and understood. As with the other two elements of his imaginative idea, it was rooted in his basic assumptions about God's redemption at work in the human condition.

De La Salle's spiritual teaching on gratuitousness provides us with an especially eloquent example of the way in which he starts with a concrete reality or material requirement, broadens his view of it, and enriches it, as it were, with all the harmonics of the divine plan of which it is a part...The Brothers teach without payment because their ministry is a free gift from the goodness of God; they also teach without payment in order that through their ministry the gratuitous love of God may reach the poor children entrusted to them. (Sauvage and Campos, p. 56)

Brother Bill Mann, FSC, observes in *The Lasallian School*, "Young people need us to help them lay claim to the goodness they really are." (p. 25) This characteristic activity of the Lasallian school is ubiquitous, expressed through every aspect of the school's operation. It is a prime example of how De La Salle's idea served to extend the reach and effect of his imagination beyond the commonly held limits of the formal education, ministerial structures, and social conventions of his times. Presuming that both the Lasallian imagination and the Lasallian idea still retain their capability for this dynamic, this examination can turn to the matter of what is necessary in order to retain the imagination and the idea themselves.

The Problem of Losing Traditional Community Structures in the Modern Lasallian Movement

If you would understand anything, observe its beginning and its development.

Aristotle

Brother Yves Poutet once observed:

Indeed, the form of pedagogy that (De) La Salle would establish was that of a teaching community. (Poutet, p.73)

This observation provides insight into both what makes Lasallian education distinct from other approaches and why the Lasallian charism is such a powerful gift to both the Church and the field of education: Lasallian pedagogy is incarnational. In other words, it is the work of Lasallian schools to provide an education that is not merely knowledge presented by a teacher through a process, but is also the teachers and the school as the process. By virtue of both its method and its ministers, Lasallian teaching embodies, rather than simply promotes, the ideal of human fulfillment, that is, salvation. To this end, De La Salle directed the Brothers to perform their ministry in a manner that not only addressed the students' present condition but also empowered them to transcend its limits in order to transform both it and themselves. This is where future meets present and hope meets need not as a theoretical construct or an educational goal, but as a breakthrough reality that is alive in the shared relationships of teacher, student, and learning.

What becomes apparent in both the foundations of and early commentaries on the Institute is that the community life of the Brothers did, both by design and through on-going self-reflection, function as the determining factor in the on-going creation and nourishment of this pedagogy. The Brothers worked together, often within explicit community exercises, to refine and advance all aspects of their educational and pastoral practices. It was the Brothers' community life that functioned as both crucible and critique of their understanding and continued development of the pedagogy, and the revolutionary ministerial vision toward which they were working. Further, its generationally

contiguous character created a story-centered consciousness – a collective memory – that ideally served as a living touchstone for faithfully preserving the Lasallian charism and, thus, its mission.

The Brothers' community began as the sole structure and model for Lasallian association for mission. While there is no way to be sure, it is unlikely that either De La Salle or the early Society anticipated any need to consider or prepare another. For several centuries, no such need would arise, allowing the Brothers' communities to continue to develop and deepen their role as the crucible of formation and association for an authentic and cohesive Lasallian memory, identity, and praxis. That is now changing.

Today, this Brothers' community dynamic no longer lies at the center of many of our Lasallian ministries. Most Partners are generally unable to either construct or commit to this traditional religious community life. While understandable, it nonetheless will still result in a gradual distancing from that integral Lasallian experience. Lasallian association is inherently association for mission. The relational dynamic of association does not simply exist to serve the mission but, in fact, generates it. For all Lasallians, knowing how to associate for mission is the first step in knowing how to do the mission. Simply, the danger for today's Lasallian family is not only growing lack of that knowledge, but the growing unawareness that it is even happening.

To respond to this challenge requires addressing a critical question: How might today's Lasallians somehow find both the initial and sustained community experiences that can provide the same essential charismatic and animative capabilities as the traditional Brothers' communities? Given the remarkable resilience and consistency of De La Salle's design, it should come as no surprise that the best approach would be the same one with which he began and on which he based the entire undertaking: formation.

Re-Discovering Lasallian Association for Mission Through Formation for Memory

It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards.

Lewis Carroll

Spanish novelist Carlos Ruiz Zafón once mused, "We seem to live in a world where forgetting and oblivion are an industry in themselves and very, very few people are remotely interested or aware of their own history, much less their neighbors'. I tend to think we are what we remember, what we know. The less we remember, the less we know about ourselves, the less we are." Mr. Zafón's thoughts suggest that the most dangerous consequence of becoming disconnected from the past is not loss of information but loss of identity.

The question of how to maintain an authentic Lasallian identity both for persons and for ministries is not new. Ultimately, it always has rested on an ability to reinterpret the original experiences of De La Salle and his first communities and schools so that they can speak to the hearts and minds of each new generation. To do this, Lasallian ministries typically have relied heavily on tradition. Tradition is a language of memory, joining past, present, and future in shared experiences of a people's deep and living story. For many Lasallians, this was and is a powerful bond between them and what they embraced as their school's Lasallian identity. Unquestionably, tradition is a valuable tool for connecting then and now. However, it also is a two-edged sword.

The challenge for tradition is how easily its language can become disconnected from its story. This generally occurs when we assume that simply revering an idea or continuing a practice will keep us

fully and firmly within its animating story. As Thomas Merton wrote, “Tradition does not form us automatically: we have to work to understand it.” There certainly is more to tradition than just keeping it. Tradition must be viewed not as knowledge of things that once happened but as an understanding of how they are still happening. For the Lasallian family, the overriding need is to find a way to be not a people both of tradition and of memory, where tradition moves beyond the practice of repeating what others did and into the process of faithfully remembering and continuing what they were trying to do.

In regard to the role of community within the Lasallian idea, one must first consider that at the center of the idea lies not one but two cores fused in a relationship that at once defines both the other and the idea as a whole: the mission and the community. As observed earlier, De La Salle made no distinction between the two; they both embodied and critiqued one another and out of this synergistic dialectic flowed the Lasallian mission. According to Brother Pedro Gil Larrañaga, FSC, in his work, In “View from the Tower: Lasallian History and Future”, “It has to do with an organization, not just an idea.” (Gil Larrañaga, p. 13) De La Salle’s insight was to craft a model that would not simply apply a way of thinking but also embody it, one that would have life well past its first practitioners.

This essential “spirit of community” has become enshrined in the Lasallian heritage through the expression used by the Brothers in the first vowed formula of consecration, “together and by association.” If they associated themselves, each one naming each one of his companions in solidarity, it was in view of a common mission, expressed today as “the educational service of the poor.” (Rummery, p. 2)

Students of De La Salle’s life have long pointed to the many innovations that mark his work, all of which permeate modern education, both Catholic and public, as well as the nature and qualities of modern apostolic ministry. While the innovations can and have been sampled and appropriated for wide-spread use by a host of school and educational systems, to maintain Lasallian identity is to never forget, neglected, or act in ignorance of the Lasallian idea’s two cores.

The Brothers’ institutional model, then, is not based on the quality of the schools but on the quality of the group of people who run the schools. If at any given time...that perspective if neglected or forgotten, the specific value of the institution is lost. (Gil Larrañaga, p. 13)

In other words, there can be no Lasallian mission without a community of persons who intentionally are in association for the mission. Furthermore, whatever new forms and functions of association are seen as necessary to respond to changing times, the seminal forms and functions must be well understood and well consulted. By rooting itself firmly in them, the Lasallian family can be sure that, even as it dares to move past the practiced and familiar and into new landscapes of faith, community, and service, it still will be teaching minds and touching hearts, still growing the Lasallian idea.

With that said, the issue of the role of community in today’s Lasallian experience takes on even more complexity, but at the same time reveals more possibilities for reclamation and re-visioning. This is because, of all of the gifts left by De La Salle, the most important one at this time was the adaptive character that he structured into the design of the mission. Gil Larrañaga illustrates this with a discussion of “five axes” of the Lasallian heritage: (1) service of the poor, (2) the perspective of the world of work, (3) education as an initiation into reasoning, (4) community, and (5) the practice of interiority (Gil Larrañaga, p. 11 ff). He explains how each axis functions as a primary point of conversation between the Lasallian movement and its world and times. Along all of them can be traced the evolution of the Lasallian identity, the ongoing founding and re-founding of the commitments, structures, and practices that characterize the ethos of Lasallian ministry.

What is most striking about these axes is their own synergistic quality, drawing from the foundational energy of De La Salle's foundational charism to become their own source of re-foundational energy as today's generative charism. Part of De La Salle's genius was that he accepted the paradox of ministry as responsive, rather than preemptive, action. Even his proactive innovations came from a guiding consciousness of particular needs that he was committed to addressing. This is the Lasallian idea at its best: the imaginative weaving together of memory, experience, and vision into a holistic understanding of what it means to be Lasallian, one that offers a possible direction for addressing the community question.

To begin, recall what have been the central practices of Brothers' communities in their own efforts to maintain effective association for mission:

- Common formation
- Common prayer
- Common recreation
- Common professional development

Many current Lasallian schools already have, in one form or another, these four practices in place as part of their regular faculty and staff activities. While requiring considerable time and planning, inserting some or all of them into the annual school calendar is clearly doable. The problem is precisely that they are inserted, often in a disjointed fashion, into a larger process that is considered to be more central and more definitive of the school's primary purpose. The result is a frequent absence of two dynamics that are essential to the full expression of both the Lasallian imagination and the Lasallian idea: first, the unique synergy of the four practices as the animating force of the entire workings of the school; and second, the ability of that synergy to summon and connect persons to a single and unified sense of the Lasallian mission.

In both cases, the ability to recognize the problem depends on a person's awareness of the historical line that runs through the evolution of mission, an evolution that took place in the Brothers' communities and the Institute that they comprised. The collective Lasallian memory tells the story of both the what and the why of Lasallian praxis, as well as points out the nature of the distinctions between the two. This is especially critical knowledge if one is faced with the prospect of not being able to fully utilize the former, which for many Lasallian ministries is precisely an obstacle that they encounter. Access to the collective memory reveals that, like so many of De La Salle's innovations, there were both proximate and ultimate ends to community practices, and that it would be the ultimate end that held the real rationale. In this case, the proximate end of building community would employ the four practices which, by way of their combined influence on the hearts and minds of the Brothers, would serve the proximate end of intentionally giving a human and Christian education, which then would serve the ultimate end of guiding the students to a deeper experience of the saving presence and love of God.

Thus, the central main creative challenge at hand is to not be satisfied with merely continuing the community practices as ends in themselves, but to somehow capture and maintain their vital dynamics as the historically constant core of the life and energy of Lasallian ministry. Consider first that the community practices of formation, prayer, recreation, and professional development cannot be compartmentalized apart from each other. This is counter-intuitive to the Lasallian perspective of education as spirituality, of all acts made one in the person and Gospel of Jesus. Consider next that the community practices *together* are a living presence of the Lasallian story of association, a connection here and now to *all* of its practitioners, past and present, that both offer instruction and ask accountability for the character and effectiveness of what is being done. This is the guarantor of

authentic association for mission that is at risk and, regardless of changing times and circumstances, cannot be lost.

Fortunately, well-conceived creative efforts toward new approaches to association will, in fact, open the door to possibilities of local interpretation and broad innovation that a lockstep adherence to earlier structures in and of itself could not. Just as the Brothers themselves have realized throughout their own history, moving on does not necessarily mean moving away. The Institute has responded resourcefully and progressively to changing social landscapes and needs — sometimes reactively, sometimes proactively — but eventually in ways that achieved extraordinary contemporary relevance and adaptability while preserving its Lasallian spirit and tradition. Formation for Lasallian memory could introduce and nurture an “innate compass” that would reside in all Lasallians by way of the Lasallian imagination and Lasallian idea, accessible to current and succeeding generations of Lasallians. The enduring benefit of this, just as the traditional Brothers’ communities were and are for them, would be its ability to guide and inform any emerging and original model of Lasallian ministry striving to understand and complete itself.

Conclusion: The Challenge of Creative Fidelity

We are told we must choose — the old or the new. In fact, we must choose both. What is a life if not a series of negotiations between the old and the new?

Susan Sontag

Historically, both the ethos and the praxis of Lasallian ministry have organized around the defining dynamic of association for mission. Originally, there was only one form for it -- the Brothers in vowed association with the Institute and within their Communities. As new forms emerge out of an urgent and practical need for them, questions have arisen as to what the word association means today. They have led to a necessary and life-giving conversation for the Lasallian family – Brothers and Partners together – not only for clarification of *what* association can and should mean today, but also for considering and planning *how* association needs to happen today.

Specifically, what does it mean to be a Lasallian here and now? What are the practical challenges and creative responses to maintaining a faithful grounding in the charism of St. John Baptist de La Salle and the educational vision and mission that it produced? Consider that at the heart of the Lasallian charism has always been a simple and profound focus: to meet the needs of the young and the poor. For De La Salle, this meant a mission that would be both reactive and proactive to the realities of those that it served. To truly meet needs, ministry must heal realities by engaging them in order to transform them. This is what De La Salle began in the form of the relational centering of his schools. The schools would be communities following the example and guidance of communities. To carry this vital model creatively and faithfully into new and different landscapes, it may be necessary to extend the Lasallian imagination as never before.

To this end, two acts — each one both a reaching back and a reaching forward — can help bring the Lasallian family to where we are being called to be. First, it must work to consciously and continuously connect with the Lasallian collective memory, the living history of remembrances, realizations, and responses that together embody the quintessential Lasallian experience. It is this memory that is the key to “getting” and living the Lasallian mission, at least as much as possible at wherever one is on the journey. It enables each Lasallian to not simply keep retelling the story as a

museum piece but to rediscover and relive it as the dynamic and prophetic force for human sanctity, dignity, and possibility that it was created and consecrated to be.

Second, the Lasallian family must respond to the world with innovations that read the signs of the times in order to transform the times, including ones that reach beyond immediately available Lasallian tradition and into its original landscape of radical openness to the will and the ways of God. There long has been among the Brothers the sense that it is up to each new generation to “re-found” their Institute. This idea holds particular importance today, especially in the search for ways to “make new wineskins” of the Lasallian tradition in full fidelity to its character and spirit. With deep experience of the Lasallian story and the common wisdom of its community, this can be done.

It would seem, then, that the critical need for both present and future generations of Lasallians are formative experiences that both engender and educate to a consciousness of the truly incarnational nature and workings of Lasallian association for mission. This consciousness would be rooted in the collective Lasallian memory, thereby serving as a properly informed and animated foundation for innovations and initiatives that can authentically and effectively translate the Lasallian charism for new times and into new contexts.

In conclusion, the most dangerous aspect of any tradition is its susceptibility to becoming a means that is mistaken for an end. It should not be forgotten that Lasallian tradition is the collective voice of a heritage urging present Lasallians to be its vital, transformative force today. The extent to which they do not merely know of but are creatively engaged with the defining moments and movements of the Mission will likely determine its survival, if only because it will prove to be the difference between a Lasallian tradition which roughly approximates an old story and a Lasallian tradition which passionately participates in a timeless one.

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