

ONE FOUNDER, FUTURE HORIZONS

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ABSTRACT

We are presenting the text of the second talk given at the French Assembly of Lasallian Fraternity on October 23rd 2011. The author understands fraternity as the essential Lasallian intuition for understanding the originality of an education dynamic which today helps to strengthen educational projects with a Gospel horizon.

Key words: school, fraternity, project, incarnation, brothers, children and youth.

No, J.B. De La Salle did not invent the school for the poor, any more than the “Christian schools”. He did not show greater generosity than many other people at his time. He did not even invent fraternity. Why then are we here if it is not to get to the essential point of his message and set off and continue to follow a Founder and those he started off, the first Brothers of the Christian Schools?

There existed, in fact, many gratuitous schools and Christian schools in this society of the end of the 17th Century, a society of generosity and commitment. Many others had created them before him. Then what did he do? First of all he discovered that a child is a son of God and that, whatever his poverty and poverties, he offers a sign of dignity. He progressively discovered, during his life itinerary, that people can give a little, a lot, of their lives passionately to these children. He also discovered, and it was rather original, that the act of education and the class can make a child grow, whatever his social background, and give him the means of becoming a man. Finally he discovered, in prayer, that when an adult is in the presence of a child, and when he is the smallest of the small, the adventure of divine creation is taken on.

No, he did not invent the School, but he perceived the grandeur of the act of education. No, he did not invent the schools for the poor but he took a look of dignity at the poor. He was not the first of the great teachers, but he discovered that, when one gives one’s life for education, one can oneself go very far. No, he was not a better Christian, priest or canon than others but he discovered that the three times holy God was engaged in this human adventure of education.

This is fine, but up to that point, it is a case of one man. And today we are gathered here because he succeeded in sharing his project with a group of men. He did not create the “De La Salle Brothers”, he did not create like Dominic, the “Dominicans” or like St.

Francis, the “Franciscans”, or like Ignatius de Loyola the “Companions of Jesus”. He instituted the Brothers of the Christian Schools and if we are starting off the *La Salle Education Fraternity*, it’s because there is a familiarity of mission, of vision and of words.

It started out from an observation and from questions. The observation was that children come to school but that they don’t stay, that you can find schoolmasters but that they don’t stay. His question was simple and it will resound in a special way in our hearts: what to do and how to do it so that the children will stay in school and that the teachers will continue in their mission of education and the human and religious growth of the children? The answer was the community of The Brothers of the Christian Schools. He did not found “Christian schools” but The Brothers of the Christian Schools. At the heart of the project is a relation, a look - at each other and for each other. In the centre the education mission and as the basis an inspiration: the Gospel. Brothers of the Christian Schools/La Salle Education Fraternity. He did not invent fraternity but something essential and original: could one put fraternity into the act of educating, in the School, in education in the rudiments of knowledge, of knowing how to be, of knowing how to live together and knowing why we should live together?

J.B. De La Salle was attempting an adventure which, in certain ways, is ours today. In this place, the school, where minds are going to grow, there are also the risks of ‘instrumentation’, the risks that one might use the child, that adults might use and abuse knowledge and power. If it is there doubtless that the Gospel is the least naturally transparent, what then has this Gospel got to do with teaching profane subjects, class councils and discipline, the timetable, organization, administration, constraints, financing, the governance of a school, which makes up our daily lot? Is its natural place not the parish, a movement, a word or a form of piety which engages little or not at all? All this is very good, says J.B. De La Salle, but we lack a place, a new place, a place for the challenges of the Gospel: the School, in what it has of the most marvelous and most coarse, the School of the classroom, of the workshop, of the recreation ground, our School, our daily life!

Brothers, Brothers of the Christian Schools, a project of fraternity. Men, at that time, who will not be priests. What does that mean? And there, we are digging deeper into the revolution which J.B. De La Salle was operating. From the power of the word of the priest, of that of the Church, he invited his Brothers to move to the service of presence. The Lasallian revolution was to go from the word to a presence, a presence which will authorize the word. But presence is primary, and there we begin to unfold fraternity, that of the first communities of the Brothers. They will make themselves present to each other, present over time to their pupils and they will keep up this presence because their Founder, La Salle was the first to make himself present to them. Fraternity, to use an expression which is theological but which will quickly resound in your hearts: a movement of incarnation. Just as Christ went towards men, he did not content himself with gathering the Brothers, with associating them among themselves, but he himself, in a movement of incarnation, moves from where he lives and associates with them. It is in this foundation moment that the present project is written.

This education project is a way of making ourselves present to each other in order to be capable of being present to the young entrusted to us, and present to our colleagues and collaborators. For a long time, Catholic education has said, and rightly so, that the

young person is at the centre of the act of educating. It belongs to our tradition, and no doubt to others, but to ours specifically, to remember that if the young person is at the centre, the adult is at the heart of our project. De La Salle knew what he was doing, not in instituting a new type of school for the poor or Christian schools, but in instituting the community of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

A society in moral, social and religious crisis was the situation of France in 1680. A crisis society. In this situation he did not take refuge in preaching, in condemning others such as those neglectful parents or mercenary teachers. He took refuge only where the Gospel could be expected: Are you able to commit yourself to an itinerary which will make you go towards the other, the very young, where he is waiting for you in his desire for human and, if he wishes, Christian growth? If St. De La Salle had only founded "Christian schools" we would not be here. One cannot compare his schools and our schools, his pedagogy and our pedagogy. If we wish to continue the adventure we must accept the fact that the framework has changed, that the context is irreversibly different, that our Catholic school cannot remotely resemble what it would have been some decades ago. On the other hand, if the faces of young abandoned persons arise, whatever their social background, the face of a colleague in difficulty, of a young teacher who has just arrived, the joys and difficulties of our profession, then J.B. De La Salle, the Brothers and this first education project have something to tell us today.

This on two conditions. The first: today we, the hundred or so Brothers present, are not handing the baton on to you. We have nothing to give you gift-wrapped. With you, together, in fraternity, we have to receive what J.B. De La Salle and three centuries of educational expertise have transmitted to us today. We are here today so that we invent, build and innovate. A second condition: Understand well the genial intuition of this man from the end of the 17th century, that of fraternity. We will only be able to advance if we understand well that what is at stake in these words – brothers/fraternity – is first of all the value of our diversity. We can dare to be different – we are already so and can dare to say it and share it, because it will be the sign that this Gospel has meaning today if men and women of different backgrounds but passionate about the young and finding their source in the Gospel....if these different men and women, with different relations in the Church, in different postures in the school establishment, with different responsibilities and talents, can go together towards the young.

But that is not all. The fraternity of which we are going to speak and which we have been for years trying to live, is a task. It is not an acquisition which is given to us and that we have to preserve. It is the very meaning of the road. We will never finish growing on this road. This fraternity tells us something very beautiful and very big: that each of us has his/her unique place, indispensable for making successful in our establishments the future this project of education for the young. Fraternity is what tells us our value, that of our profession as teacher, educator, as members of the staff at the service of the establishments. It will remind us, when necessary and more and more, to choose in our establishments projects, investments, the orientation of pupils, the opening and closing of classes, in our daily human work, it will be there to remind us that without stepping back, without pausing and sharing, without discussions and prayer, without reflection, nothing great, nothing lasting, nothing truly educational will be done tomorrow in our establishments.

Something sends us back to the time of our foundation. The School was born of a wish, a wish of the State, of the Church, for the good of the young, their salvation and the good of the Kingdom. It was born with the risk of 'instrumentalisation'. Financial reasons and financial pressures, religious reasons and pressures could lead to some School or other, without noticing it, being sent back to that epoch: an epoch when one put first that which is only second (but not secondary). The temptation has always been there and will always remain, because it is a question of the young, of children and of education, of profiting from this time in order to model consciences, souls, liberties. In a questioning society, in a context of change, of fear and sometimes of 'stiffening' – as was that of the epoch of the first Brothers – if there do not arise groups of men and women in fraternity where each one has his/her recognized place, word and presence, if there are not tomorrow in our Catholic education establishments, Lasallian or otherwise, communities which agree to re-read their practices, to let themselves be called upon by the Gospel, to let themselves be 'jostled' by each other in fraternity. How will we ensure an authentic service of education and evangelization of the young from these communities at the heart of our schools? Imperceptibly, with even the best reasons, they will run the risk of giving in to a power be it economic, political, moral or even religious.

De La Salle fought in the name of the young but also in the name of the master and in the name of God, that the Gospel in the educating act be a Gospel of promise for the children and for the schoolmasters. Committing ourselves, taking this step, if we wish it, in fraternity, will mean making each other a promise, a promise of supporting each other in friendship, in the complementariness of our positions, our postures, even our relations as believers and searchers. If we agree to put our footsteps, a little, in the steps of Christ, whatever this 'a little' may be, the youth of tomorrow will be the big winners in this little stretch of road which we undertake to travel. Today we remember that nothing is great without a promise, that which the Brothers made to stay associated with each other, that of an educator made to a young person never to abandon him and that - and this is a bit new – which we are called to make to each other, of having an education project where the young and the more disadvantaged among them will be the first to be served. G. Bernanos says of the devil that he is "a friend who does not remain to the end". The brother is the friend who waits till the end. Dear friends we make ourselves the promise to remain a long time and perhaps right up to the end.

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