

EXTENDING LASALLIAN CHARISM: ITS TEXTS AND LIVED CONTEXTS FOR THE SPIRITUALITY OF TEACHERS

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Contemporary educators will find resources for their own spiritual lives in the exploration of Lasallian texts and their lived contexts that enriched that charism for over three centuries. Vatican Council II mandated that religious orders rediscover their founders' charisms, those core spiritual principles which inspired and grounded them. Since the Council, two insights have emerged: 1) charisms are gifts from the Holy Spirit for the entire Church; 2) religious orders are obliged to share these insights with colleagues so that the Church will continue to benefit.

John Baptist de La Salle (1651-1719), French priest and saintly founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, authored the traditional Lasallian texts that were initially addressed to the community: male educators serving only male students. Contemporary feminist scholarship rightly is concerned about androcentric texts. Using the insights of Gadamer, Ricœur, and Tracy, those traditionary Lasallian documents contain surpluses of meaning that can be mined for ideas that supersede their initial audience. The first Lasallian principle respects education as a ministry of equals who serve as elder siblings to the young entrusted to their care. La Salle's texts and their lived contexts highlight "brotherhood/sisterhood" among an educational ministry of equals.

The twin spirits of *faith* and *zeal* are essential to the Lasallian charism. La Salle utilized metaphors drawn from Pauline writings to identify the proper role for faith-filled teachers: ambassadors and ministers, good shepherds and guardian angels. Each metaphor emphasized teachers as agents of Jesus' message. The spirit of faith is nurtured in prayer which constantly turns the agent to their Source: God. La Salle used the metaphor of good architects to describe the spirit of zeal. Zeal best serves when it represents careful planning, attention to potential dangers, and accommodating the needs of the clients. Although French philosopher Michel Foucault was suspicious of Lasallian zeal being too connected with the oppressive manipulations of power, his contemporary Emmanuel Levinas counters with a view of zeal as the minister's obligation to meet the needs of the Other.

The fourth Lasallian principle concerns service to the poor. La Salle worked primarily with the poor, but authorized additional ministries, too. Notre Dame's James Burtchaell

indicts the Brothers for abandoning the poor and expanding their ministries to the privileged, particularly in higher education. I argue that Lasallian service transcends economic barriers and sensitizes all persons to the needy.

Extending Lasallian charism must attend to the fundamental right of educators to embrace and articulate their spiritual convictions. Many effective efforts invite lay colleagues to embrace the Lasallian charism. This dissertation proposes that the challenge now is to provide opportunities where Brothers and teachers continue this dialogue and discover both their shared and unique roles in Lasallian ministry. I propose that Thomas Groome's Shared Praxis methodology and Parker Palmer's notion about communities of truth be combined to form educators in a lively Lasallian charism for our time. Educators would study the Lasallian heritage, prayerfully reflect about and discuss it, appreciate it in light of their own personal circumstances, and articulate its significance in their own words to today's audience. John Baptist de La Salle, I believe, would endorse this expansion of the charism to a wider Lasallian community. It respects the particular nature of the Brothers' vocation, but recognizes the integral agency of lay men and women who are the dominant workforce in Lasallian education today. This proposal challenges all parties to understand that the "unity in community" that La Salle prized will have new meaning in the Twenty-first century.

As a community of dialogue and trust, the proposed *Lasallian Liaison program* recognizes our obligation to one another to clarify our deepest convictions and to spiritualize our ministry of education. The program does not dictate to its participants what they must believe or do to become Lasallian. It does, however, invite people to study the texts, to understand the contexts, and to apply them to our own personal and collective actions in schools. The ultimate purpose is to serve better the young people entrusted to our care. In time, gifted Lasallians will be able to articulate what the charism means for them now. They will always have access and recourse to the key elements of the Lasallian charism:

- It is a call given by God to teach.
- It is a mission open to men and women, vowed, lay, ordained, who seek to work in partnership as equals.
- It is a vision about human dignity that seeks to share the Good News of God's Reign with our younger siblings.
- It is a ministry steeped in a spirit of faith that strives to see as God sees.
- It is done with the fervent zeal of people who acknowledge how important it is to minister to the young.
- It is a mission dedicated truly to those most in need; it is an invitation to a lively, open engagement with a community of like-minded persons who believe that God sustains this ministry to save our brothers and sisters.

This proposal recognizes that we can account for the special charism that John Baptist de La Salle left as his Spirit-inspired gift to God's people. This study does not claim to be exhaustive. Nevertheless, I hope I have made the case that a careful study of Lasallian texts and their lived contexts has the potential to enrich and expand the charism for future generations of teachers of all kinds.

I believe that the Lasallian commitment to a sibling model of education actually works for equality, and thus helps to address any lingering doubts on the part of women about their essential and vital place in the future of Lasallian schools. I am convinced that the proposal to continue the dialogue begun in formal Lasallian educational initiatives through the *Lasallian Liaison program* allows us Brothers to be true elder siblings to our colleagues. I believe our educational partners will be inspired to adopt the elder sibling model for their own teaching and will pass it along to future generations of teachers. At its best, the Lasallian charism reflects themes echoed by many contemporary theologians.

Lasallian partnership ultimately is a sibling-based belief that our shared goal is to befriend one another as brothers and sisters before God as we work to form a community of educators who seek to bring about Jesus' vision of God's Reign.¹ Contrary to contemporary theologian Philip Sheldrake's concern, to embrace the Lasallian vision of our mutual siblinghood for service is not to force some idiosyncratic pseudo-religious life upon lay people, but to invite them to own their unique personhood as brothers and sisters of humanity for a shared, vital, God-given mission and ministry for education.

¹ I find this theme to be given eloquent voice in: Elizabeth Johnson. *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York, NY: The Crossroads Publishing Company, 1992). Johnson observes: "Like all good relations friendship is characterized by mutual trust in the reliability of the others(s), but what makes it unique is that friends are fundamentally side-by-side in common interests, common delights, shared responsibilities" (217). Similarly, Diarmuid O'Murchu, *Consecrated Religious Life: The Changing Paradigm* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005) suggests: "Befriending is a caring stance with unique possibilities. It transcends the compulsive desire for control so central to patriarchal domination. It also transcends the well-intentioned patronizing often adopted in the parenting model. Befriending acknowledges the right of the other as other in both its strengths and vulnerabilities" (51). My conclusion is that the Lasallian charism celebrates the friendship of equals that marks the best understanding of what it means to be brother or sister to one another in our shared Christian vision.