

# The Lasallian Teacher

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## Introduction

I understand the title of this topic, on which I have been asked to speak, as referring to those teachers today throughout the world who take their inspiration and particular approach to teaching from the life and writings of Jean Baptist de La Salle and the religious brotherhood which he founded. Such teachers are to be found in more than 80 different parts of the world. They teach in primary schools, high schools, colleges and universities; they work with delinquents, drop-outs, runaway children, drug addicts, refugees, immigrants and nomads, young people from Europe, Africa, North and South America, Asia and the south Pacific, from the Christian, Moslem, Buddhist, Hindu, Shintoist, Confucianist and animist traditions. Although today the Brotherhood itself numbers some 9,000 members, Lasallian teachers are many times more numerous: women as well as men; Protestant, Orthodox, Free Church and Quaker as well as Catholic Christian; Buddhist, Moslem, Hindu, Confucian and Shinto as well as Christian.

To do justice to the richness, vastness and complexity of the topic deserves a treatise, rather than a single address. I propose, therefore, to frame my presentation within the following limits:

- I. What were the salient characteristics of the founding tradition of Jean Baptist de La Salle and his first Brothers from 1680 to 1719?
- II. How did the religious brotherhood maintain and develop this tradition over 300 years?
- III. What are some of the challenges of being a Lasallian Teacher today?

## Salient Characteristics of the Founding Tradition 1680-1719

At the age of 29 in 1680, Jean Baptist de La Salle, a young French priest, became aware of the "*pitiable condition*" of many of the poor boys in his native Rheims. They had little opportunity of receiving even an elementary education, and being both idle and unemployable, fell easily into criminal habits. To their general illiteracy and ignorance was joined a lack of understanding of their dignity as human beings, destined for eternal happiness with God through the saving, redeeming work of Jesus Christ. De La Salle became aware of all this largely through the intervention of someone whom I like to think of as the first "*Lasallian*" teacher, a layman from Rouen called Adrien Nyel, an experienced schoolmaster. With Nyel as first instructor and former of teachers, De La Salle opened a number of schools in Rheims and its immediate neighborhood between 1680 and 1688, formed the teachers into a group who chose eventually to call and associate themselves as "*Brothers*" - "*brothers to one another and older brothers to the children*" - moved to Paris by 1689, and eventually opened other "*Christian schools*" as he called them in 23 places in France. By the year 1705, after 25 years of experience, De La Salle had written for and with his first Brothers, an impressive number of educational, spiritual and practical works. These workings enable us to see clearly the main characteristics of what was to become an educational **movement**, carried forward by the "*brotherhood*" which he founded. Allow me to recall these salient characteristics by a series of contrasts between what De La Salle found when began and what he offered as counter-cultural initiatives.

First, he lived in an age of great cruelty, where children found stealing were often branded on the forearm with the letter "V" (*voleur* = thief), where young offenders so branded could, if they were again apprehended, have their hand cut off or, if they were strong youths, sent to row in the King's galleys for seven years. But De La Salle and his first Brothers wrote in *The Management of Schools of 1705*:

*"Often children do not have enough strength of body or mind to bear the many difficulties with which life presents them."*

This sense of compassion, of pity for the plight of the poor, overflows in many quotations from De La Salle's meditations for Sundays and Feasts as well as in the Sixteen Meditations for the Time of Retreat, for example:

*"Recognize Jesus under the rags of the poor children whom you teach" (96:3) or, "You should look on the children whom you are entrusted to teach, as poor, abandoned orphans for indeed, although the majority have a father on earth, it is as though they had none, and are left to their own efforts as regards the saving of their souls. That is why God entrusts them in some way to your responsibility." (37:3)*

Or, from the Meditation of the Feast of St. Margaret of Scotland which we celebrated this week:

*"You are entrusted by your work with instructing poor children. Do you love them? Honor Jesus Christ in them....." (133:3)*

Second, De La Salle found that *"it is only too common for the working class and the poor to allow their children to live on their own, roaming all over as if they had no home, until they are able to be put to some work. These parents have no concern to send their children to school because they are too poor to pay teachers, or else they have to go out to look for work and leave their children to fend for themselves. These unfortunate children, accustomed to an "idle" life for many years, have great difficulty when it comes time for them to go to work."* (194:1)

The counter to this was the school which *"ran well"* (a frequent expression of De La Salle), where all children could come irrespective of their social status, and where all could obtain the basic education which made them capable of obtaining useful steady employment, thereby enhancing their human dignity.

Third, De La Salle found many young people corrupted by bad companions. *"(These unfortunate children), through association with bad companions, learn to commit many sins which later on are very difficult to stop, the bad habits having been contracted over so long a period of time"* (194:1). The response was again the Christian school where each child was known, called by name, where careful supervision precluded many bad associations, and where a growing sense of mastery of the demands of school, encouraged and sustained young people in their sense of their own dignity. De La Salle, long before we used the word *"peer group"*, frequently counselled his Brothers about the real dangers of bad companions for those children who were weak.

Fourth, De La Salle found young people ignorant of their faith. Religion had to be integral to the school through formal teaching and religious practices. The young people came to know and understand the great mysteries of the Christian religion - the loving creating God, who sent his son Jesus, born of Mary, human like us in all except sin, who suffered, died and rose, and who in turn sent the Spirit to sustain the Church as his continuing presence in the world. Thus they found the sense of their own lives with respect to God and their fellow human beings through the morning and afternoon reflections given by the Brother, and by their apprenticeship through knowledge and practice to the duties of the Christian's life as learned in the daily and Sunday catechism lessons.

Fifth, De La Salle found a society where the rich and the middle class could pay for an education, but where the lack of esteem for those who usually taught the poor children in the existing charity schools meant that there was no stability in teaching. Teachers taught only so long as they had no other employment which paid better. To this state of affairs, De La Salle and his Brothers brought the idea of **gratuity**. No tuition was to be paid by any of the pupils in the Christian school. A foundation grant of money was sought and *"no gifts were to be received by the Brothers from the pupils or their parents on any day or occasion whatsoever."* With this one imaginative stroke, De La Salle made it possible for the poor boy and the better off boy to sit on the same benches. He also freed his Brothers from the ambiguity of gifts and presents, as well as freeing his pupils, temporarily at least, from the rigorous

barriers of a class dominated society. And in doing this, he stabilized the school by raising teaching to a **vocation** rather than an employment. With his own Brothers, he was led to deepen his understanding of vocation not as something we **have**, but as something we **are**. In a certain sense we do not have the vocation, but we allow the vocation, the calling, to possess us.

These five salient characteristics were translated into practices to be found in the foundation writings and traditions.

- I. Cruelty gave place to love, so that the longest section of the Management of Schools is given to a profound treatise on correction and the conditions which should accompany it, and two meditations of the sixteen for the Time of Retreat are on the same topic;
- II. Erstwhile vagabonds became daily scholars so that as punctuality and attendance became the norm, progress in school became noticeable and the school gradually won the support and interest of parents and pupils through the weekly and monthly tests, the visible signs of advancement through good notes and changing places;
- III. Young people vulnerable to corruption through bad companions found a good companionship and good example in the school where teachers knew them by name, loved them, and encouraged them in good habits;
- IV. Children "*far from salvation*" became accustomed to being reminded of the presence of God whom they came to know and love through the regular practices of prayer and religious activities in the Christian school;
- V. The principle of gratuity meant that all children were respected and loved for who they were and not for what they could give. Indeed, De La Salle often insisted that his Brothers try to love the poor children even more than the better off. This was no theoretical ideal, but a firm principle which brought him into conflict with the authorities of the time who wished to identify and certify the poor as poor - an indignity and humiliation of the poor De La Salle could never accept, but which cost him dear in lawsuits brought against him.

If we wish to examine these five salient characteristics, we have an impressive literature to consult:

- I. The Daily Regulations for the Community and the School
- II. The Duties of a Christian
- III. The Rules of Good Living and Christian Politeness
- IV. The Canticles and Prayers to be used in the Christian School
- V. The Management of Schools
- VI. The Meditations for Sundays and Feasts
- VII. The Meditations for the Time of Retreat

The first five of these writings and possibly even some of the meditations for Sundays and Feasts, were in the hands of the Brothers by 1705. Despite their different subjects, the wordings have a unity which it is important for us to note from the following perspective: They envisage the pupils as called to attain their true dignity as human beings and "*true disciples of Jesus Christ*." By learning the duty of loving God and neighbor, by acting with respect towards others; they envisage the Brothers, the first Lasallian teachers, as people called to the ministry of teaching, sustained in their faith and zeal by frequent meditation on the great **truths of salvation**. But De La Salle and his Brothers were never destined to be catechists only. Their examination of conscience was frequently directed to their competence in teaching basic subjects which allowed their pupils to master the skills necessary for them to live their working lives with dignity and with a clear sense of their calling as children of God. Let me sketch in a few strokes, some historical incidents which show clearly how the Lasallian tradition was preserved and developed.

### **The Development and Extension of the Tradition**

De La Salle died in 1719, leaving about 100 Brothers in 23 communities in France. By the time of the French Revolution in 1789, there were more than 1,000 Brothers, all in France except for one small

group in Rome. This tenfold increase had not pleased everyone in this age of Enlightenment, because the growth of such schools increased the number of people who could read and write. Le Chalotais, one of the French "*philosophers*", wrote in some alarm to Voltaire to complain that these "*Freres ignorantins*" (ignoramuses, because they taught no Latin!) were putting pens into hands "*better fitted for the plough and the hoe!*" Le Chalotais was right in fearing a better informed peasantry or urban working class, because books teach their own use and spread ideas more quickly. After the first onslaught of the Paris Revolution, many private schools for the rich were hurriedly closed, but in the Faubourg Saint Antoine, the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul and the Brothers of the Christian Schools were allowed to carry on their work, so esteemed were they by the poor. In the city of Angers, the revolutionary mob recognized the work of the Brothers for the poor by installing them and their pupils in the school for the wealthy, hastily vacated by the Oratorians. But the later anti-religious direction after 1792 eventually led to the suppression of the Institute.

Thirteen years later in 1805, the Brotherhood re-formed near Lyons and went through a period of spectacular growth during the nineteenth century. Soon after the end of the Napoleonic wars, a select committee of the House of Commons under Lord Brougham discussed the extraordinary achievements in the schools of the Abbe de La Salle. It seems that the committee was greatly impressed by the "*order, system and method*" of such schools, as well as by the fact that the children were so well disciplined that the police station in the Faubourg Saint Antoine was able to reduce its numbers from 200 to 50 policemen!

In the same period between 1802 and 1820, the Irish Christian Brothers of Edmund Ignatius Rice and the Brothers of Mary of Blessed Marcellin Champagnat, were founded. Each drew substantially on the Lasallian writings and traditions in establishing their individual traditions of education. In the same way, the Sisters of the Christian Schools of Blessed Marie Madeline Postel and the Brothers of Christian Instruction were to take the Lasallian workings as their basis in evolving separate traditions.

In the continuing search for a national system of primary school education, another Select Committee of the House of Commons in 1859 commissioned Matthew Arnold, the future poet and author, to visit elementary schools in western Europe. His comprehensive report gives us some interesting insights into the schools of the Christian Brothers. He was particularly impressed by the peaceful silence, the order and the industry of the pupils, but noted in his recommendations that the strength of the schools came from their uniform methods and from the fact that there were never fewer than four Brothers in the schools. He emphasized that this minimum number of Brothers associated together in a community made them the strongest schools he visited, but copying such a system in England would not be easily done with teachers who did not share the life of the Brotherhood.

It was in the missionary expansion into the near East, far East, Canada and the United States, that we first find the growth of lay teachers who were not members of the Brotherhood. In Egypt and the near East, these first teachers were usually employed to teach languages which the missionary Brothers did not know. But the school was first and foremost a "*Brothers' school*" in which such other teachers were usually not associated with the general aims and directions of the school. Part of this reticence, however, it must be said, was based on the idea that the Brothers were to have only minimal contact with "*people of the world.*" Such was the spirit and interpretation of the Rule and this attitude was to last for many more years, even to recent years in places which some of you could cite.

The most challenging event to this tradition of the "*Brothers' school*" was undoubtedly the shock of the secularization laws of 1904 in France. In brief, these laws forbade what were considered certain basic laws of religious communities - religious dress, chapels, crucifixes in classrooms, etc. In protest against these laws, many thousands of French Brothers left France between 1904 and 1909, and were associated with the founding or development of schools and works in many different countries. As a result, both in France itself as well as around the world, many lay teachers came to work with the Brothers themselves in the foundation and development of their works. Successful schools in traditional mission lands were soon sought out by families who were neither Catholic nor Christian. The de-colonializing after the Second World War accelerated the change in membership which sees the schools as a Christian presence in non-Christian lands, non-proselytizing, modelling the possibility of differing ethnic and religious groups living together in peace. Such has been the achievement of schools, for example in the near East where often Moslem, Jewish, and Christian pupils sat on the

same benches and shared equally in the life of the schools.

Let me say a final word about the Lasallian tradition and its development:

First, although there was "*order, system and method*" based on the Management of Schools, the Brothers never hesitated to adapt, to re-write, to change it as circumstances required, in well over 100 editions in French, as well as in English and Spanish editions. This was the case as well with the texts on politeness and on the duties of a Christian.

Second, the very success of the original schools led to a prolongation of the years of elementary education, and eventually to the development of high schools and colleges as in this country. In France, the development has been more towards technical education as well as towards agricultural schools. In Belgium there has been a continuing tradition in art, graphic arts, and architecture.

Third, whenever the letter has been treasured more than the spirit, (as in the long continued controversy over the teaching of Latin), there has been difficulty in making progress, in meeting new needs.

Fourth, there has been an unbroken tradition of work with delinquents and the underprivileged since the first work of St. Yon in 1705.

Fifth, the gradual internationalization of the Brotherhood and its works has diminished the **uniformity** which marked the beginnings. At the same time, this presents a continuing challenge as more Lasallian teachers, not members of the Brotherhood, are developing their ways of drawing from this same heritage.

In summary then, we can note that the development of the tradition is present right from the very beginning. Elementary schools gradually became primary schools, secondary schools developed naturally from these, and so eventually did colleges and universities. The school in Calais as early as 1705 was teaching basic navigation to the children of fishermen. Sunday academies for former pupils were conducted in Paris as early as 1697. In the 19th century the Brothers were to be associated with schools of viticulture and agriculture, as well as with commercial academies and technical schools.

A word needs to be said about the teaching of Latin. De La Salle had judged that the teaching of Latin was inappropriate for children who needed an elementary school education and, against the custom of time, insisted on teaching in French and also on teaching French grammar and syntax. For doing this, he and his Brothers were widely attacked in his own lifetime, and at many times in the 18th and 19th centuries. This foundation principle, based on common sense and ordinary observation, later became enshrined as an unchangeable characteristic of the Brothers' schools. Its application, however, in a dogmatic way brought great difficulty in most English-speaking countries, notably in the United States, until after 1923.

But at this moment in history, the majority of teachers in the various works of the Brothers around the world are not members of the Brotherhood. I myself lived this transition in Australia where, after teaching for some years in a school with Brothers only, we extended the school to cope with a strong immigration flow of Catholic students. Decisions formerly made at the dinner or breakfast table in the community had now to be tabled in a formal staff briefing. As one of my own blood brothers, a layman, was teaching in the same school at this time, I was particularly conscious of the importance of clear channels of communication!

Some Lasallian schools today no longer have a community of Brothers. If the Brothers regret this, so too do their lay colleagues. I have had the experience of seeing many schools, particularly in Asia, where a small community of Brothers continues to work with a lay faculty of some 200 teachers, the majority of them not Christians. For many hundreds of Moslem, Buddhist, Hindu, Shinto and Confucianist teachers there is no problem in accepting the philosophy of a Lasallian school. De La Salle is recognized as a great spiritual leader who devoted his life to improving the lot of poor children, giving them a sense of their inherent dignity and of the meaning of life.

All of this involves change, not simply once, but **many times**, and the Brothers are called to this perhaps even more strongly because of the natural tendency to freeze the tradition. The community of the Brothers is to serve in a special way as the guardian of the story, the living memory, but it is with our lay colleagues that we seek to share the riches of the tradition as we go forward together in confidence to our fourth century. How this may be done is now the concern of my third section

<http://www.delasalle.org/convocation/resources-lasallian-spirituality-articles/1.3.2.19b.html>

## PART TWO

### The Challenges of Being a Lasallian Teacher today

Are there children, young people who have not really come to know God and so are far from salvation? Are there also children, young people, who are left to themselves, not really cared for by their parents, or family or society? These are the two basic questions which challenged De La Salle and his first Brothers. I think they challenge each one of us in different ways today, and I wish to explore some ways in which the foundation principles already invoked in this presentation can help us to develop a more profound sense of being Lasallian teachers.

**First**, are we prepared to **associate ourselves with others** in order to be sisters and brothers to them, and **older sisters and brothers** to the young people whom we meet. That is the **cornerstone** of being Lasallian, and both dimensions are important. I make no distinction here between those who are professed Christian Brothers and those who are not, because both are challenged to form the community of the staff. Notice that I have said 'community' and not 'team' because a team is called to work together in a common action whereas **a community** can be formed only by persons who choose freely to breathe life into something which is essentially in the order of being rather than of doing. Community is respectful of individual difference, finds beauty in diverse people and variegated experiences, recognizes fullness in both one liter and two liter containers without demanding that the quantities be equal, for community, **choosing to be associated** is about quality, not quantity.

Community can be built, developed, and sustained only by those who are willing to contribute themselves generously to the task. Thinking and acting as "*sisters*" and "*brothers*" is the necessary condition.

De La Salle wrote much about what he saw as the only way of achieving this permanent attitude of seeing "*Jesus under the rags of the poor children you teach.*" He called it a **spirit of faith**, a way of looking at things, of judging and of acting "*with the eyes of faith,*" looking beyond the immediate appearances to how it would look as part of God's abiding presence in the world. The person who could so look could then allow his deeper understanding to overflow **in zeal, in love for other people.** It is a vision of Matthew's Gospel Chapter 25, of the hungry being fed, of prisoners and sick being visited, of thirsty people being given to drink. Seeing with faith; acting with zeal or love, because as John of the Cross said: "*In the evening of life we shall be asked only if we have loved enough.*"

Secondly, for De La Salle and his Brothers, "*the school must go well.*" "*See that your school functions well,*" he often writes. This is the sense in *The Management of Schools* when the preface indicates that this was a work of De La Salle, along with the oldest and most experienced Brothers. "*Nothing has been written down,*" continues the preface of 1705, "*which has not been well planned and well tried, the advantages and disadvantages of which have not been put forward, and concerning which mistakes and unfortunate consequences have not been foreseen.*"

This seems to be the practical application of the sense of community expressed in "*together and by association.*" This is a well-structured school, based firmly on consultation and shared responsibility. In

such a school, correction and discipline are seen to be indispensable in helping to create the necessary conditions for good teaching and good learning, for mutual respect and for learning through study.

**Thirdly**, Lasallian teachers are those prepared to try to see their work as an educational **ministry**. They teach young people, not simply their subject matters. The only condition for a good school, when all is said and done, is that there be good teachers. Michael Oakeshott, musing on what he calls "*this transaction between generations*," offers some words to indicate the richness of teaching which may include "*hinting, suggesting, urging, coaxing, encouraging, guiding, pointing out, conversing, instructing, informing, narrating, lecturing, demonstrating, exercising, testing, examining, criticizing, tutoring, drilling and so on - anything which does not belie the engagement to impart an understanding. And learning (he continues) may be looking, listening, overhearing, reading, receiving suggestions, submitting to guidance, committing to memory, asking questions, discussing experimenting, practicing, taking notes, recording, re-expressing and so on - anything which does not belie the engagement to think and to understand*" (M. Oakeshott, Education: The Engagement and Its Frustration).

The ministry of education is all of the above. In a Lasallian sense it includes the willingness not to allow all of the above to remain at a functional level, but to witness to religious and moral values. By witness, I do not mean some artificial strutting or posturing, but rather the quality of respectful relationship where values are caught more than taught. In a religious sense, it is De La Salle reminding us that part of our prayer should be the bringing to mind of those students with whom we have most difficulty in order to commend them to God. It is De La Salle reminding us that one of our duties is to touch the hearts of those we teach, that we are called to show others the way to salvation by our actions as well as by our words.

I would hope that the sharing of the Lasallian heritage would encourage the Brothers to share with their colleagues some traditional means which may have fallen into abeyance. I am thinking particularly of the importance of the *Reflection*, a short inspirational "*reflection*" as the title suggests, spoken "*from the heart to the heart*," a reflection on the profound truths of life and death, the meaning of life, often couched in a true story, no more than some three to four minutes long. Within the tradition, the reflection was to be in a particular way the overflowing of the meditation which the Brother is called to practice each morning and evening. The *Reflection* is risky because it calls you to share something of yourself. It does not have the security of the math formula, the chemistry equation, nor the exact syntax of a sentence. It leaves you asking with Yeats that others walk softly lest they tread on your dreams! But it also elevates the formal relationship beyond the polite and the objective to the very personal level where value and aesthetic and faith meet. For, no matter what is our own religious commitment, it is to this level of calling forth, of deep calling unto deep that the notion of ministry extends. Those who are far from understanding or making sense of life are entitled to **know**, indeed **need to know**, how others begin to make sense of it all. This is indeed the "*holy ground*" of the other person and we must stand away from conditioning and indoctrination. But we must also consider whether we are not ourselves culpable if we indoctrinate as it were by default - by remaining enigmatic dispensers of knowledge. For De La Salle it was clear: "*Your duty is to touch hearts.*"

**Fourthly**, I would like to return to the foundation principle of **gratuity** as I see the extraordinary effort which private schools must make in this country to maintain themselves. I am filled with admiration for what Catholic schools have done and continue to do. I know that needy pupils are discreetly aided and that tuition is kept as low as is possible. I have come to know in the last two months in this country just how many teachers receive less than they could command in the public sector. There is a deep sense of gratuity in this because the very sacrifices you make are not widely known in the community at

large.

Having acknowledged this generosity, I would like to offer a further reflection on the profound sense of Lasallian gratuity. The value it enshrined was that all pupils had an equal right to education. In our acquisitive, competitive, materialistic society with its dominant business ethic, I would make a plea for all those values which cannot be bought with money. I would look at the impression made on many generations by Lasallian teachers who saw the value of silence in a noisy, talk-dominated world. I would reinforce your efforts to offer young people times of quiet retreat where "*still small voices may be heard.*" I would commend you for all those young people whom I have met in your schools, who have come to know of others less fortunate in our society through your outreach programs. This is real gratuity because it draws a response from others, a giving without counting the cost, a giving with no hope of reward. But, as we have all discovered, it is in such giving that we receive most fully, and that we ourselves are enriched by our gratuitous service.

## **Conclusion**

We have ranged over some 300 years of history as we have inspected the profile of the Lasallian teacher. Some conclusions suggest themselves.

First, as we have dwelt on Lasallian origins and subsequent development, it is important to note how creative and diverse the different currents of the tradition have been. Tradition and heritage will be life giving provided we do not fall into an ideology of slogans and unthinking repetition. The obvious remedy to this will be good critical study of foundation texts and creative application to new situations. The U.S. Region is heavily committed through the Buttimer Institute to this development. If this is not done, you will fall again into the mire of the Latin question.

Second, the richness of the concept of the Lasallian teacher is already evident in the complementary roles of Christian Brothers and colleagues where they work together in parity. Development of the tradition requires both groups to continue to form their educational communities. The Brothers' colleagues are important in their own right as competent, dedicated teachers, and not simply to the extent that they are seen as "*mini- Brothers!*"

Third, I would like to offer you a vision of the Lasallian teacher as it was formulated in 1705 in the last page of *The Management of Schools*. There we find listed the Twelve Virtues of a Good Master. In 1787, Brother Agathon, Superior General, developed these twelve virtues in a small book, printed just before the French Revolution and there is a subsequent history which is outside my topic. Listen to the virtues of a Lasallian teacher:

Seriousness, Silence, Humility, Prudence, Wisdom, Patience, Restraint, Gentleness, Zeal, Watchfulness, Piety, Generosity.

Which virtues had the most pages allotted to them? Patience and Gentleness!

Thank you patient and gentle Lasallian Teachers.