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# “The” Mission Becomes “Our” Mission

Lasallian Formation in the District of  
San Francisco

Brothers of the Christian Schools  
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2007

## Presentation

The present MEL bulletin will no doubt connect to thousands of readers who want to get the best out of life. When life is taken seriously, the impossible becomes possible, that which is doomed to failure defies fate, daily events take on a miraculous dimension.

So, should we not bother with what they do in the District of San Francisco? Is not this just another among many experiences and plans that are being spread around the international Institute?

In his introduction, Greg invites you, the reader, to transcend your local situation and to give context to reflection, and I assure you that this task will not require much effort on your part; almost without realizing it, you will put yourself in the action as you leave your post as observer. It is very probable that at the end of the reading, you will ask yourself the same two questions that appear throughout the story: Where am I in all of this? To what is God calling me?

A text like this, written by a Brother “saint” of the Institute, perhaps would not come as a surprise to us: to speak about the mission, the founding story, the magnificent Lasallian history, would be like normal discourse... But given the fact that the text was written by a lay Lasallian leaves us wondering because, simply, it breaks the barrier of the foreseeable and the expected. Of course, this in itself is not enough... But it will be enough because, first of all, this story is almost autobiographical; secondly, because it is believable, real, it is about ordinary life in a state of combat; thirdly, because it is a mouthful of pure air that is so needed in our personal, community lives and in our mission.

When life is lived deliberately and with passion, when it has been experienced tenaciously, it can be stated honestly, almost with surety, as the author does. Possibilities are then opened, and the future allies itself with those who want to bury mediocrity. Just like in the Gospel of Jesus, miracles always presuppose faith and prayer, in the miracle of transforming lives - the author suggests - four elements are necessarily present at all times in the “powerful” Lasallian heritage (see Chapter 3). The author believes in mir-

acles because he has lived a miracle and has himself been the object of a miracle...

The author recreates, enjoys, and almost goes into ecstasy as regards what in Lasallian terms is known as the founding story. Captivated by the "founding myth" - the main title responds in great part to it - he connects with the reader when the impact has greater effect, just by appealing to our present lives. Because it is not about recalling, nor repeating, nor copying what is best in that history: it is about responding today, as the experts say, with creative fidelity, in an historic time that is very different and in a context not at all similar to the past. It is about learning from the past, loving the present moment and transforming it with renewed radicalness so as not to interrupt the wonderful heritage received, and to guarantee a future filled with hope.

So then, should we not bother with what they do in the District of San Francisco? Yes, we should, as a pretext and a springboard to reach your heart and to prepare you for miracles.

# Introduction

## **A Personal Reflection on a Charism That Transforms Lives Through Education.**

*“Formation, formation, formation...”* Over the past several years, in the midst of numerous conversations related to the future of the Lasallian Educational Mission and of our Association for Mission, many people I have encountered in the United States-Toronto Region have emphasized the importance of strong Lasallian formation programs to strengthen people’s understanding of, and commitment to, this mission. These programs are integral to the successful accomplishment of the mission. They give individuals and communities the direction and focus they need and want.

Much of the work that I do in the District of San Francisco and in the United States-Toronto Region is Lasallian formation - providing orientation programs for new employees, leading retreats for various groups, facilitating workshops for educators, creating resources for use in Lasallian ministries, etc. I love my work. It is a ministry, really - something I feel called to, something I feel is vital to the educational mission, something I am passionate about.

In this bulletin, I will share with you my convictions about the Lasallian educational mission and about the formation that strengthens our commitment to this mission. In the first chapter, I will briefly comment on my own experience of being formed as a person, as an educator, and as a Lasallian. In the second chapter, I will share some insights related to initial and ongoing formation and will describe a number of Lasallian formation programs in the District of San Francisco and in the United States-Toronto Region. In the third chapter, I will reflect, and will invite you to reflect with me, on the power and relevance of the Lasallian heritage today. I will do this by describing four fundamental elements of our heritage. These four elements are at the core of our formation efforts today.

My reflections, to be sure, are rather locally based, reflecting my ministry primarily on the West Coast of the United States. For those of you reading these reflections from other parts of the

world, I invite you to consider my reflections in light of your own experience and your local situation. Certainly, some “translation” will be necessary to adapt these reflections to your own circumstances. I hope that you find these thoughts helpful.

A note about the format: reflection questions are provided at the end of each chapter in order to assist you in your own reflection on the impact of the Lasallian mission and formation programs in your life and in the life of your Lasallian ministry. They are appropriate for personal, private reflection as well as for group reflection and discussion.

My convictions about the Lasallian Educational Mission begin with the relationship between teacher and student. In the end, it is this relationship that accomplishes our mission of human and Christian education. So, let’s get started by going back a few years - 30 years, in fact - to a small high school and three student teachers who touched a heart...

# 1. An Educator's Journey

## **Phil, Roger, and Ron.**

In 1974, I was in the middle of my junior year in high school. I was attending a Catholic secondary school. It was a pretty strong school, and I was doing... okay. Just okay. Grades and my classes were the highlight of my days - I was a good academic student. I did my homework on time, studied hard for tests, earned good grades. Outside of the four walls of the classroom, however, I was lost. I had a number of classmates whom I would call "acquaintances" - guys I knew by name and by where they sat in class. I had few friends. I was shy, reluctant to try too hard to make friends, and resigned to spending my days with my nose buried in books.

During my junior year, three young men - Phil, Roger, and Ron - who were studying for the priesthood were "assigned" to my school for two years. Their job was to teach, to help with school programs, to live with the community of priests and brothers on campus - in short, they were to immerse themselves in the school community. One of their responsibilities was to start a retreat program for juniors and seniors. When they asked for volunteers to attend the first retreat, I took a risk and signed up. My faith was important to me, and - who knows? - perhaps the retreat would be interesting. I went on retreat. And I had a good time. I found that I actually enjoyed visiting with my classmates. I began to make friends. To my surprise, Phil, Roger, and Ron asked me to help organize a future retreat. Of course I said yes. I made more friends. As a result of my involvement with these retreats, my senior year in high school became the best of my four years there.

A few years later, as a college sophomore, I found myself agonizing over the choice of a major - where should I focus my studies? What will I do for a career?

The more I considered this career conundrum, the more I found myself thinking about Phil, Roger, and Ron, and the impact they had on me. They had really helped me to begin to move my life in a new direction - they had drawn me out of my shell. They had

encouraged me to participate in activities. They had supported me, had spent time with me, had gotten to know me. As I looked back on my experience with them in high school, I realized that they had believed in me when I was unable even to believe in myself. They were so genuine about their belief in me that I slowly began to believe in myself. That was the beginning of a time of blossoming for me. And I owed it to Phil, Roger, and Ron for watering the plant that was me, nurturing me, and helping me grow. As I sat in the baseball bleachers in the fall of my sophomore year in college trying to sort out my future, it came to me: Whatever I chose for a career, I wanted to do for kids what Phil, Roger, and Ron did for me. I wanted to be in a job that allowed me to make a positive difference in lives - young lives - especially the lives of young people who are struggling. In the end, I became a teacher.

As I reflect on this experience in light of our Lasallian educational mission, one thing becomes clear: the relationships between teachers and students have the power to change lives by touching the hearts of the students. Ron, Phil, and Roger were not polished teachers at the time - they were just beginning their journey as educators. They were just beginning to learn their profession. However, they had a profound influence on my life because of the concern they had for me as a person. They touched my heart so profoundly that I remember their influence even to this day. I am reminded of John Baptist De La Salle's words from his meditation for the Feast of St. Peter (139.1): "Do you have a faith that is such that it is able to touch the hearts of your students and inspire them with the Christian spirit? This is the greatest miracle you could perform and the one that God asks of you, for this is the purpose of your work."<sup>1</sup> I am grateful for the influence these three young teachers had on me. Such an influence is at the core of our mission as Lasallians. In another meditation (43.3), De La Salle reminds us: "You carry out a work that requires you to touch hearts."<sup>2</sup> At the center of all of our efforts, whether in high schools or in Lasallian formation programs, is this ultimate goal: to touch the hearts of those entrusted to our care.

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<sup>1</sup> *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*, transl. Richard Armandez, FSC, and Augustine Loes, FSC (Landover, Md.: Christian Brothers Conference, 1994), 257.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.



My first few years of teaching, similar to most young teachers, were full of ups and downs, highs and lows. One day things were great and I was convinced that I had wisely discerned the career path that was absolutely right for me; the next day, I was a disaster, felt like I would never be a good teacher, and was ready to quit. In fact, my second year of teaching was so awful that I *did* quit. I entered studies for the priesthood. After 18 months I came to the conclusion that I was not being drawn or called to become a priest. So, I left the novitiate and moved home to live, temporarily, with my parents. Now came the hard part: I needed a job.

I looked, and I looked, and I looked for any job other than teaching. I was convinced I had been there, done that. However, I could not find a job. Ultimately, I decided that I would apply for some teaching jobs just in case I failed to find anything else. Surely, with a couple of years of teaching experience under my belt, I could talk my way into a teaching job. Then, I would teach for a year, save some money, and then find the job I was *really* suited for. After a few months of job searching, I was finally offered a teaching job. But I was very tentative in my commitment to the job. *Just get me through the year*, I thought, *so I can get on with the rest of my life...*

Instead, one year became eight years as I discovered an educational community that was passionate about teaching young people, especially those who were having difficulties. These were teachers who truly were a community - it was clear that they loved the kids, and it was equally clear that they loved each other. They supported each other, they encouraged one another, they shared resources with one another, they spent lots of time together. When I left after eight years to take a new teaching job at another school, I wondered to myself: *Would I ever find a place as wonderful as that particular school?*

As it turned out, the answer was yes - I did find another school as wonderful as my last one. It was a Lasallian school, and it grabbed my heart in time just like the last one did. Only, this one was different - it was not just a single little school that happened to be doing a great job of educating teenagers. No, not at all - it was part of a whole system of schools that did the same great job. Wow! What a wonderful discovery that was! Since joining that

school community - a *Lasallian school community* - I have never left education, and I have never stopped working for the Lasallian educational mission.

The story is a common one - little by little, one decision led to another, gifts and passions were uncovered and eventually embraced, and, seemingly before I knew it, I had found my passion and my passion had become my life's work. Somewhere along the way in my life journey, *career* had slowly transformed into *vocation*.

What was it about this Lasallian school that was so compelling, so appealing, so attractive? The answer lies in a story that began a few hundred years before that particular school was founded. I began to learn this story - this heritage - and experience it in many personally profound ways from the very beginning of my time there.

### **The Power of Formation.**

I participated in my first Lasallian formation experience two months before stepping foot into the classroom at La Salle High School in Milwaukie, Oregon. Just after accepting a job there, I was invited to participate in a five-day conference for religious studies teachers from the high schools of the District of San Francisco. I knew *nothing* about any of the other schools. I barely knew anything about La Salle High School. And I knew nothing about the Christian Brothers. All I knew was that, before I had spent one day teaching in one of their schools, I had been invited to participate in a workshop with 25 other teachers, and that impressed me. In 10 years of teaching, I had rarely experienced such a gathering. Sure, I had taken classes in Religious Education and Theology, and yes, I had attended workshops with teachers from other Catholic schools. But this was a rare (for me) gathering of teachers from schools all sponsored by the same religious congregation. Little did I know that such gatherings were part of the fabric of the District of San Francisco - an important element of the system of support and formation that was provided for teachers and staff.

After arriving at the conference center and checking in to my room, I ventured into the living room for the pre-dinner social. There, I met a Christian Brother. We began to talk. He wel-

came to me to Mont La Salle and to the District of San Francisco. Just what the "District" was comprised of was a mystery to me. As we visited, the conversation turned to the declining number of Brothers in the District and around the world, and the growing number of lay people involved with the schools sponsored by the Christian Brothers. This Brother, who I later discovered, was the Visitor, explained that the workshop I was attending was part of a series of workshops intended to, among other things, strengthen relationships among people in District schools. The De La Salle Christian Brothers, he explained, were in the midst of developing a very important program of formation for lay people and Brothers, a program that would ensure the vitality of the District's educational works for many years to come. A critical element of the program was to invite lay men and women to learn the story of the Brothers and their educational mission and to participate with them in full partnership in the accomplishment of the mission. What a refreshing thought - before I even worked one day at La Salle, I was invited into the mission of the Brothers. Having worked with a number of other religious communities in Catholic schools, I was aware of a decline in the number of people entering religious life. That was true for all Catholic religious communities and that had been a reality for a number of years. This decline in numbers was affecting the ability of vowed religious to continue to operate schools and other ministries in the way they had been accustomed. Many religious congregations were in the process of consolidation - closing some ministries, merging others, turning others over to the local diocese. However, the De La Salle Christian Brothers were different - they saw the hand of the Holy Spirit in what would otherwise appear to be a desperate situation and they had a plan in place to assure the survival of their educational mission - and that plan included me...somehow. Hmm... What was I getting myself into?

As I drove home at the end of the workshop, I felt energized and excited about my new work at La Salle High School, and I felt a kinship with 25 other Religious Studies teachers from Lasallian schools. I was intrigued by this group of religious men who were looking to the future of their ministry in a way so different from other congregations I had experienced. With this workshop, I had begun my formation as a Lasallian. I had been welcomed into a

community of people who shared a common commitment to educate in Lasallian schools. What animated their commitment? What inspired them in their ministry as educators? Where would this formation take me? I did not know for sure, but I was definitely intrigued.

Over the next few years, I began to hear and learn the story of John Baptist de La Salle and the Brothers of the Christian Schools. I began to learn about the many and varied works sponsored by the Brothers throughout the world. What I heard gave words to what I had been looking for over many years. What I heard about Lasallian education resonated deeply with my own beliefs about education and my best hopes for young people. What I heard reminded me of Phil, Roger, and Ron - those three young teachers who had moved me to enter the teaching profession. I heard words like "touching hearts," "human and Christian education," "education of the whole student," "seeing the presence of God in all students," "special concern for the poor." These were ideals that I had pursued personally for many years, and it meant a great deal to me to be part of a worldwide organization that shared the same values and that was committed to providing a life-changing education for nearly one million students across the globe. After many years of searching, I had found an educational charism that fitted perfectly with my beliefs and my person. The more I learned, the more I felt "at home" in Lasallian education. And, the more I learned, the more I wanted to learn. Little by little, step by step, I was getting hooked.

This formative experience hearkens back to the Hebrew image of Yahweh who molded and fashioned a people much like a potter shapes clay into a beautiful pot. Listen for a moment to the words of the prophet Jeremiah:

*The word that was addressed to Jeremiah by Yahweh, "Get up and make your way down to the potter's house; there I shall let you hear what I have to say." So I went down to the potter's house; and there he was, working at the wheel. And whenever the vessel he was making came out wrong, as happens with the clay handled by potters, he would start afresh and work it into another vessel, as potters do. Then this word of Yahweh was addressed to me, "House of Israel, can not I do to you what this potter does? - It is Yahweh who speaks. Yes, as the*

*clay is in the potter's hand, so you are in mine, House of Israel.*" (Jeremiah 18: 1 - 6)<sup>3</sup>

*As the clay is in the potter's hand, so you are in mine.* Slowly, I was being molded into something more authentically myself than I had ever imagined possible - by a loving God who knew me better than I knew myself, a God who had drawn me in many unexpected ways to a learning community that I had, unbeknownst to me, been searching for all my life. How did God mold me? What were the "tools," if you will, that shaped me? Certainly my experience in the classroom and at La Salle High School was a powerful tool. However, what had brought me to embrace this mission more consciously and intentionally and actively were experiences of formation - times and activities and gatherings intended to give words to my deepest desires as an educator. I learned most powerfully about our heritage and charism by participating in formation programs sponsored by leaders at my school, in my District, and in the United States-Toronto Region. Local orientation programs sponsored by my District's education office, workshops for religious studies teachers and for deans of studies, District retreats for teachers and staff, the first Lasallian Leadership Institute sponsored by the Region - these and many other gatherings began to shape me, invited me to reflect about my vocation as an educator, led me to prayer as I pondered God's hand in all of this, drew me in step by step, leading me to deeper and deeper commitments. Moreover, these programs also served to help strengthen a sense of community among all of the participants, constantly reminding us that we were in this *together*, and that together we would be most effective in shaping the lives of the students entrusted to our care. Over time, these programs, combined with my daily experiences at La Salle High School, slowly - almost imperceptibly, at times - strengthened my *commitment* to this group and this educational venture that we call Lasallian education.

### **Formation for Mission: Consistent With Our Founding Story.**

Over the years, as I have been able to study the Lasallian educational heritage, I have come to appreciate how consistent our current formation efforts are with the first years of the Brothers of

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<sup>3</sup> Scripture passage taken from *The Jerusalem Bible*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd., 1966.

the Christian Schools. When John Baptist de La Salle agreed to help Adrien Nyel open the first school in 1679, he did so because he wanted to assist Nyel in accomplishing a good work - a school that would provide an education for children of poor and working class people. These youth did not have access to a stable, effective education at the time. "Perhaps," we can imagine our Founder thinking, "this school will be of assistance to these youth in Rheims." As it turned out, this was not the end of De La Salle's commitment to the educational service of the poor... it was only the beginning. Gradually, De La Salle became more and more deeply disturbed by the plight of these boys and their families. The more he came to know these youth and their families, the more determined he became to do something to assist them. This led him into many adventures and down many paths he could never have anticipated. One commitment led him to another commitment, until he found himself doing something he had never anticipated, something he did not think was in him to do - founding a religious community of educators dedicated to the human and Christian education of the young, especially the poor.

In relatively short order, De La Salle and, over time, the first Brothers, came to several realizations. First, De La Salle, with the early teachers, realized that this mission could not be accomplished by a number of individuals working in isolation from one another. It could only be accomplished *by a community of dedicated, committed educators inspired by a common vision - the salvation of young people in great need by providing a human and Christian education.*

Second, De La Salle concluded that retreats, reflections, common prayer times, discussions related to what these teachers came to embrace as a calling - in today's language, *formation* - were all *absolutely necessary* elements of addressing the needs of the boys confided to their care. How could they most effectively reach the hearts of these students? What kinds of relationships with students would maximize the educational experience in such a way that the students could live lives of greater dignity and opportunity? Teaching was a "ministry" that required reflection, intentionality, and a relationship with a loving, creative God who had, after all, called these men to this educational ministry.

These principles continue to hold true today throughout the Institute. We, as was De La Salle, are deeply disturbed by the needs of those who are poor and marginalized in our societies. We continue to be convinced that education is the answer both to helping these youth rise above their poverty to a greater dignity and a more fully-realized human potential and to helping all people grow in their commitment to be of service to those most in need. We are absolutely committed to accomplishing our educational mission together, knowing that no one person, no matter how gifted, can help effect change like a community of educators can. We know we need to be together in the accomplishment of our mission, and quality formation programs can help bind us together into community.

But what do today's formation programs look like? What are some fundamental elements of formation for Lasallian Mission? We will turn our attention to these questions in the next chapter.

### For Your Reflection

- What was the path that led you into the Lasallian Educational Mission?
- Who were the most influential people along the path?
- In what ways has your commitment to this mission evolved little by little, step by step, one decision leading to another?

## 2. Programs of Lasallian Formation for Mission

### **The Power of Charism.**

A few years ago, I attended a meeting with a group of Catholic educators from across the United States. These educators represented diocesan offices, diocesan schools, schools sponsored by religious congregations, and Catholic universities. During the meeting, one person expressed his opinion that Catholic schools sponsored by religious congregations have a definite advantage over Catholic schools that are not - they have a charism, a founding story, and a particular set of beliefs and commitments about education, and these give particular focus to their work. The charism gives the ministers in these schools something significant to “wrap their arms around” and embrace. Having worked in both types of Catholic schools, I agree with this insight. We do have an advantage as Lasallians, with a powerful founding story and a compelling history to inspire us, a charism that focuses our educational efforts especially on those most in need, and a clear set of beliefs and commitments about education. However, if teachers, staff, and administrators in the school are not aware of the religious congregation’s charism, founding story, and educational beliefs, how can they embrace them?

Generally speaking, programs of Lasallian formation educate Brothers and colleagues about the Lasallian educational mission in such a way that they are able to integrate the mission into their personal lives, their professional lives, and their community lives. These programs also introduce participants to the larger Lasallian communities of District, Region, and Institute and invite them to explore ways they belong to the larger Lasallian family. Also, these programs aim to strengthen participants’ sense of belonging to the larger Lasallian family. Programs range from orientations for new personnel to advanced, intensive formation programs such as the Lasallian Leadership Institute and the Buttimer Institute in the United States/Toronto Region. These programs seek to strengthen the commitment of participants and communities to the mission and to engage them on intellectual, emotional, and spiritual levels.



## **Formation Begins at the Beginning.**

In San Francisco District schools, the invitation to be associated with other Lasallians for the mission of human and Christian education is made right away as well-formed administrators and directors of programs consider which applicants for job openings will be the “best fit” for the school. What constitutes a “good fit”? In addition to having the necessary training for the particular job responsibilities (for example, completion of a teacher training program for a mathematics teaching position), administrators and program directors are looking for people who already embrace our mission without even knowing it. Their personalities, their beliefs about education and about students, their vision of what it means to be an effective educator are in harmony with Lasallian beliefs and vision. Their commitment, especially to those most in need, is strong - they, too, are disturbed by the plight of those on the margins and they seek to do something about it. Once they hear the story, they nod their heads and can immediately relate to it on some personal level because it resonates with them.

It is very important that those who work in Lasallian ministries begin to learn of the Lasallian Educational Mission right away - as soon as possible after they are hired - ideally, before their first day of work! This type of “Orientation to the Lasallian Heritage” serves both as an opportunity to welcome new employees into our community and as a tool to allow them to focus their preparation for their new job responsibilities in light of Lasallian educational values.

An effective orientation program is not exhaustive. Rather, it is an introduction, a chance to highlight the most important facets of our educational heritage, and an invitation to begin to live the mission from one’s first day on campus. Participants include anyone newly hired, from those with no work experience to those with 30 or more years of work experience. They include Brothers and lay men and women, priests, and members of other religious congregations who are joining the educational community. They include program directors, principals, presidents, second-line administrators, teachers, support staff - in short, *everyone* who is new to the ministry.

For many of the participants, they hear the founding story for the first time. They meet Saint John Baptist de La Salle and make con-

nections between his story, their own story, and the story of the Lasallian educational mission. They learn of his growing concern for the needs of children of the poor and working classes and his growing commitment to do something about it. They are introduced to the language of the Institute - the terms we use daily almost without thinking (Institute, District, Lasallian, Visitor, Chapter, Association, etc.). They learn not only that they have joined a local community of teachers, counselors, social workers, and the like, but also that they have joined a world-wide community at the educational service of nearly one million people. They consider some essential characteristics of education from a Lasallian perspective and begin to consider how they will give life and expression to these elements through the work they do. They are invited to share in a spirituality of education wherein they reflect on their presence at their Lasallian apostolate as more than a coincidence - as a calling to make a difference in the lives of persons "entrusted to their care." And a couple of questions are planted - "Where do I fit in all of this?" and "What is God inviting me into?" The questions are planted, but not answered. Only time and experience will begin to provide an answer. This initial orientation is admittedly brief, providing only a cursory overview, only the briefest of introductions to the Lasallian family. But it is enough to help them begin the journey.

### **Ongoing Formation in Lasallian Ministries.**

Once the initial invitation has been extended - what then? It is time to allow persons to *live the story* for a period of time, accompanied by more experienced Lasallians at the local level. It is time to experience the reality of the mission, complete with challenges, successes, disappointments, fulfillment, and much hard work, all the time supported and encouraged and guided by others in the community. It is time to encounter the many and varied poverties that these youth experience on a daily basis. It is time to also experience the tremendous challenges that come with responding to these needs. Gradually, perhaps without even realizing it, these new teachers and staff members become more active participants in the Lasallian educational community.

Some of the most impressive programs of formation that I have seen develop at individual schools in the San Francisco District over the past ten years are the ongoing programs of accompani-

ment for new teachers and staff that were alluded to earlier. These programs provide direction, mentoring, guidance, and community for one, two, and sometimes three years at a time. They provide regular time for new employees to gather with more experienced colleagues to share successes and challenges, to ask questions and to seek answers, to learn the many and varied facets of our educational and spiritual charism. Ultimately, these programs invite new employees to work *together* - with one another and with other more experienced members of the community - to provide a human and Christian education to those entrusted to their care. *Together and by association* - even before they hear the words, they have the experience.

It is important for us at the local and District levels to provide teachers, staff, and administrators with regular opportunities to gather for reflection and prayer, times to revisit those questions that were planted at the beginning: *"Where do I fit in all of this?"* *"What is God inviting me into?"* Such experiences of prayer - of retreat - allow persons to put their experience in dialogue with the heritage and to deepen their understanding of, and commitment to, our educational and spiritual mission. New teachers and staff at San Francisco District schools participate in a twilight retreat in the middle of their first year at the school. This retreat, of two hours' duration, provides time for participants to reflectively review significant pieces of our mission (for example, recognizing the presence of God, special concern for the poor) in light of their real-life experience, brief as it has been thus far. Slowly, incrementally, persons make connections between the mission and their experience. Gradually, they discover their role in accomplishing this mission. Little by little, the Lasallian mission begins to resonate within their hearts. More and more, they begin to see, practically speaking, how they live the Lasallian mission in their daily interactions with those entrusted to their care. Not only do they begin to feel more connected to the broader mission, but also they begin to feel that they are a part of the community of educators at their school.

This growing commitment to mission and community certainly needs to be facilitated at the local level through retreat experiences, ongoing exposure to the Lasallian family through workshops, readings, and video reflections, and many other creative methods (for example, placing a quote from one of De La Salle's

Meditations at the top of the daily announcements, prominently displaying banners throughout the building articulating key components of mission, starting a faculty or staff meeting with a prayer reflecting a piece of the Lasallian story, etc.). However, effective formation does not only take place at the local ministry. Effective Lasallian formation for mission should also take place at broader levels of the Institute.

### **Ongoing Formation at the District and Regional Level.**

So, ongoing formation must also take place in larger venues, at the District and Regional levels. It is important for persons to experience the Lasallian family by coming together with persons from other District or Regional works to reflect, to pray, to share, and to build the larger Lasallian community. Such gatherings can be and often are powerful experiences that strengthen a person's commitment to a mission that, they come to experience, is shared by a rather large group of people around the world. The San Francisco District has sponsored many such gatherings in the past several years, including retreats or workshops for Deans of Studies, Deans of Students, Athletic Directors, Admissions Directors, Development Directors, Social Studies teachers, Mathematics teachers, Science teachers, English teachers, Language teachers, Support Staff, and Counselors. Such gatherings harken back to the conferences held in the early 1700's that resulted in the early versions of *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*. People with similar responsibilities in Lasallian educational ministries gather for a few days to pray, to share, and to discuss. What's working? What challenges are you facing? How do you respond to this question? What does it mean to be a Lasallian educator in our particular field? It is a time to network - realizing that, as always, the wisdom of the group far exceeds the wisdom of many individuals. It is also a time to be reminded of the mission we share - a time, once again, to ask ourselves those critical questions: "Where do I fit in all of this?" "What is God inviting me into?" Participants come away from these gatherings renewed, reenergized, inspired. And they bring all that energy and inspiration back with them to their local community, where everyone benefits.

One of the most influential Regional programs of formation to arise within the past ten years is the Lasallian Leadership Institute

(LLI). Over 400 Lasallians, Brothers as well as lay colleagues, have completed the Institute, and another 200 will begin the LLI in the summer of 2006. The LLI is a three-year formation program that takes place during one week each summer and two weekends during each school year. Each year is devoted to a particular theme: *The Lasallian Educational Heritage, Spiritual Leadership in Lasallian Ministries, and Lasallian Leadership and the Educational Community*. More than any other formation program in my experience, the LLI has fostered a spirit of association that stretches beyond the boundaries of individual schools and agencies - sometimes even beyond the boundaries of Districts. The formation offered by LLI has been directly responsible for the establishment of several new Lasallian schools in the Region. Graduates of the LLI have a broader and deeper sense of Lasallian “family” because of both the formation and the community fostered among participants over three years’ time. Several lay men and women graduates have answered the call to serve at other District schools in the past several years, and a growing spirit of cooperation has taken root among schools. More established schools serve as older brothers and older sisters to new schools, sharing labor, ideas, personnel, and camaraderie. The intensive and long-term formation offered through LLI inspires and empowers participants to take on greater leadership roles in advancing the educational and spiritual mission and in strengthening the experience of community at the local level.

### For Your Reflection

- What types of Lasallian formation have you experienced? Is there one formative experience that stands out for you as most influential in your growth as a Lasallian?
- Who welcomed you into your current Lasallian community? What did they do that helped you begin to integrate into the community?

### 3. The Power and Relevance of the Lasallian Heritage Today

#### **A Reflection on Four Fundamental Elements of the Lasallian Heritage.**

The Lasallian educational heritage is powerful and transformative. It is qualitatively different from many other educational experiences, for several reasons. In this chapter, I will highlight four fundamental elements of our heritage that give it its transformative power:

1. The commitment to be aware consciously and often that we are in the presence of God, especially when in the presence of those most in need;
2. a special concern for those who are poor, for those who find themselves on the margins of society;
3. the primacy of relationships in our educational ministry;
4. our connection to John Baptist de La Salle and the Founding Story - a story that continues to inspire and guide us.

Each of these elements will find resonance in the life experience of other Lasallians, just as they have in my own life experience.

#### **1. Remembering the Presence of God.**

As Lasallians, we find God present especially *in the world* - in the persons entrusted to our care, in each other, in the difficult times and in the smooth times. De La Salle said it beautifully in his *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*: "Wherever I go I will find you...there is no place not honored by your presence."<sup>4</sup> We begin every prayer with the invitation, "Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God." The wording of the phrase is important. It does not invite us to place ourselves in God's presence. It does not invite God to become present to us, as if we could call up God and say, "OK, God, it's prayer time. Come on

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<sup>4</sup> *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer* by John Baptist de La Salle, original transl. Richard Arandez, FSC, edited and revised transl. Donald Mouton, FSC (Landover, Md.: Christian Brothers Conference, 1995), 59.

down.” It says that we already are in God’s presence. We are *always* in God’s presence, though we may not be aware of it.

Yet, being aware that we are always and everywhere in God’s presence changes our outlook on everything and everyone. For example, this awareness changes the context of encounters we have with students in difficulty. Rather than focusing on the difficulty and on the frustration and on our inability to find a quick and easy solution, we begin to focus on possibility and on hope and on creativity, knowing that God is calling us to a different kind of encounter. It frees us to look for the good and the redeeming qualities in others even when these qualities are hiding deep below the surface. It invites us to see the potential and grace in *ourselves* - sometimes when we need to do so the most. In his Meditation for the Feast of the Epiphany, De La Salle urges the Brothers to “recognize Jesus beneath the poor rags of the children” entrusted to their care.<sup>5</sup> “Rags” can literally be ragged clothing; “rags” can also be a defiant and combative attitude; a refusal to think of anyone other than oneself; a lack of self-confidence that causes one to fade into the woodwork of the classroom and passively refuse to participate; a lack of belief in oneself that says “I can never do this, so why try?” We are called to see through whatever it is that blocks us from the goodness, the potential, and the dignity of each person entrusted to us. For young people especially, it is important that they have significant adults in their lives who believe in them when they are unable to believe in themselves. These adults hold up a different kind of mirror to their students, a mirror that reflects their goodness and capacity and competence rather than their shadow and weakness and incompetence. We are called to hold this mirror up to them metaphorically for as long as it takes for them to begin to see these qualities in themselves. Once this happens, they will never be the same. We have given them a gift for life.

Being mindful of the presence of God leads us to more fully embrace life with a spirit of faith, knowing that God is with us, guiding us along the way - guiding us through the events of our lives. In order to bring this characteristic to life, we must be attentive to God’s active and pervasive presence in our own lives, and

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<sup>5</sup> *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*, 179.

this requires as much attention and care as we give to the important work of planning our programs, activities, classes, retreats, counseling sessions, recovery programs, and game plans. Some of the most important formative work we can do with Lasallians involves helping them to experience the meaning and power of God's presence for themselves, helping them to identify times when they have been acutely aware that they were in God's presence. The more they can identify these high points in their lives, the more they can develop the ability to see God in the ordinary, in the everyday. Then God becomes much more than a part-time helper who comes to our aid when we extend the invitation in prayer. Then God becomes a constant and faithful companion, truly transforming how we see the world and how we approach others as we participate in providing a human and Christian education. Then career slowly transforms into *vocation*. Then we begin to see that the world truly is filled with the presence of God.

If truth be told, most of us are *unaware* of being in God's presence much more often than we are aware. So, an important question for each of us is: *How can I be more attentive to the presence of God in my life and in the world?* Recognizing that we are creatures of habit, De La Salle and the first Brothers developed a number of rituals to remind us that we are in God's presence. For example, in the *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*, he indicates that the recollection of the presence of God is the first step in preparation for prayer.<sup>6</sup> In a letter written to a Brother dated May 15, 1701, De La Salle says, "The remembrance of God's presence will be a great advantage in helping you and in inspiring you to do all your actions well."<sup>7</sup> During a retreat, De La Salle made this resolution: "The Rule of our community is not to enter the house or any room in it without saying a prayer to God and fastening our thoughts on him. I will make certain not to neglect this practice."<sup>8</sup> Upon entering their classrooms, the Brothers were instructed to kneel beside their desks, make the sign of the

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<sup>6</sup> *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer* by John Baptist de La Salle, 25.

<sup>7</sup> *The Letters of John Baptist de La Salle*, Transl. Colman Molloy, FSC and Augustine Loes, FSC (Landover, Md.: Christian Brothers Conference, 1988), 20.

<sup>8</sup> John Baptist de La Salle, *Rules I Have Imposed Upon Myself*, as quoted in *John Baptist de La Salle: The Spirituality of Christian Education*, Carl Koch, Jeffrey Calligan, FSC, and Jeffrey Gros, FSC, editors. Classics of Western Spirituality Series, (New York: Paulist Press, Mahwah, N.J. 2004), 227.



cross, and remember God's presence. Every half hour, a bell was rung in class and a student stood up at his desk and said, "Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God." The message is clear - we are always in the holy presence of God.

I will never forget the first time I heard those words, *Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God*. They were spoken by the principal of a diocesan Catholic high school to begin a prayer at the opening of the first faculty/staff meeting of the school year. For some reason, I heard the words in such a way that they stopped me cold. The words struck me powerfully. They reminded me that God was not some presence I manufactured on my own. Rather, God is always present. It is me who is absent sometimes. Being deeply aware at that moment that God is always present greatly eased the anxiety I was feeling about the new year and a new job, because I knew then that I was not alone in accomplishing my teaching responsibilities. I thanked the principal afterwards for his moving prayer. I was so touched to be working for such a charismatic - and creative - leader. I thought my wise principal had made up this prayer! It wasn't until years later, when I began teaching at a Lasallian school, that I became aware that it had a 300 year history. A powerful prayer, indeed!

## **2. Special Concern for the Poor.**

A second transformative element of the Lasallian Educational Mission is our commitment especially to those most in need. John Baptist de La Salle and the first Brothers, remember, addressed a difficult social situation of the time. The Institute came into being in response to the needs of children of the poor and working classes for an education that would transform them by giving them the tools that they would need to find productive work and the spiritual training that they would need to fully realize their dignity as brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ. And we remain true to that founding commitment today in a variety of ways.

We should be, and are, disturbed on many levels by the situation of the economically poor today and are determined to respond in whatever way we can. In the United States-Toronto Region, this commitment has spurred several inspiring, innovative programs. The rapid growth of the San Miguel Schools, primarily middle schools dedicated to gratuitous education for children from very low income families, is one such example. These schools provide

educational opportunities for young people in areas that provide little educational opportunity. They provide an academic, social, and religious education that prepares all students for secondary school. Impressive as this is, equally impressive are the ways that Lasallian secondary schools near the San Miguel Schools have collaborated with the San Miguel Schools to offer their graduates opportunities for Lasallian secondary education - providing a climate in which over 90% to nearly 100% of the graduates continue their education in colleges or universities, while the high school *graduation rate* in the local public schools is sometimes as low as 50%. In some cases, Lasallian colleges and universities have established or are establishing partnerships with the San Miguel Schools to provide assistance for young people wishing to continue their educations at the post-secondary level.

Another innovative program to provide educational opportunities for the economically poor is the Cristo Rey Schools, a network of secondary schools in the United States sponsored by a variety of religious congregations (including the De La Salle Brothers). These schools, located predominantly in very difficult urban settings, provide a Catholic, college-preparatory education at a sharply-reduced tuition because of their innovative Corporate Internship Program, a work program in which every student in the schools participates. Students work in teams of four to fill an entry-level day job at a local business or non-profit, rotating their work days so that each student works five days each month. The pay that would normally go to the workers goes instead to the school, subsidizing to a great degree the cost of educating each student. Students not only receive an outstanding college preparatory education but also receive valuable work and life experience through their job placements. And corporate sponsors benefit from the opportunity to be mentors to these youth - training them, challenging them, guiding them. In some cases, these business people become like older brothers and sisters for these adolescents, becoming deeply concerned for their welfare both now and in the future. The entire community benefits in the Cristo Rey experience. Three of the eleven Cristo Rey Schools currently open are Lasallian schools.

How are these programs related to formation and the power of the Lasallian educational heritage to transform lives? Interestingly enough, several of these schools were founded by people or are

staffed by people who were working at “established” Lasallian schools and had completed significant formation programs such as the Lasallian Leadership Institute and felt moved and inspired to devote their energies in direct service of those who are poor and marginalized. As happened with the Founder, these people became more and more disturbed by the plight of those in great need, and they were moved to respond in very dramatic ways. Along the same lines, Lasallian schools in close proximity to these schools, as noted above, serve as “Big Brother” schools, offering personnel, volunteer tutoring, and consultation to the new schools. All are part of the same Lasallian family.

Also inspiring in our District and Region are serious efforts being made to make established schools that have come to serve a predominantly middle- and upper-middle-class population over the years more accessible to students from economically disadvantaged families. Difficult as it is to raise hundreds of thousands and even millions of dollars in financial assistance annually, schools do so willingly because, through strong programs of Lasallian formation, they have been captured by the call to change the lives of the economically marginalized through education. Creative programs in social justice education and service-learning strengthen young people’s understanding of and commitment to attending to the needs of those in the larger community. More and more, these programs extend beyond the Religion curriculum and Campus Ministry programs to include many other curricular areas and departments. Science classes study environmental issues and work to clean up local streams. Spanish classes study immigration and literacy issues and dedicate time to tutoring young Latino children who are new to the United States and who need help learning English. Athletic teams participate in community clean-up projects. The list grows with each year. Through programs such as these, all students and adults gradually become sensitized to the needs in the local community.

This concern for the poor goes well beyond a concern for those in economic need. It extends to those students who are struggling socially, academically, interpersonally, intrapersonally, and spiritually. In fact, it was this explicit concern for a broad range of students on the margins that so captured me in my first years in a Lasallian school. It was clear to me that the faculty, staff, and administration had created a climate and a culture wherein peo-

ple took care of each other. People - students as well as adults - were sensitive to the needs of others in the community and willingly stepped forward to assist those in need. This was impressive to me - that an entire community acted this way quite naturally. It meant that the community had been formed and shaped around this value so effectively that it became part of the fabric of the school, part of the school's culture. And this value, I have come to understand, emerges directly from a heightened awareness of God's presence in each other and in our world.

### **3. It's All About Relationships.**

I have often noted that one of greatest insights - or perhaps intuitions - of De La Salle and the first brothers was the fact that the success of their efforts was directly dependent on their ability to build loving, supportive, dependable relationships with their students. It was this relationship that opened the minds and hearts of the students to learning - academic, social, spiritual, communal learning. A look at the 1720 edition of *The Conduct of the Christian Schools* points this out clearly. The Brothers established a system of getting to know young people and their situations. At admission, they had quite a bit of information about each young person, based on an interview - previous schooling, parents, parents' occupations, religious background, parents' hopes for their child, and on and on. At the end of each year, each Brother completed a description of each child in his class, describing behavior, personality traits, strengths, weaknesses, and advice for dealing with the young person. This information was passed on to the next year's teacher to help him get to know his students.<sup>9</sup> The Brothers were to know their students well enough to guide and correct them effectively - which was done according to a rather structured set of rules, it is true, but which was also adapted to the particulars of each student. As De La Salle notes in his Meditation for the Second Sunday after Easter, the Brothers "must be able to understand their pupils and to discern the right way to guide them... They must show more mildness toward some, more firmness toward others. There are those who call for much patience, those who need to be stimulated and spurred on, some who need

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<sup>9</sup> *The Conduct of the Christian Schools* by John Baptist de La Salle, Transl. F de La Fontainerie and Richard Arandez, FSC (Landover, Md.: Christian Brothers Conference, 1996), 200-202, 241-242.

to be reprov'd and punished to correct them of their faults, others who must be constantly watch'd over to prevent them from being lost or going astray."<sup>10</sup>

The invitation of this meditation is brought to reality in many places throughout *The Conduct*, including the significant section on correction. This section includes a subsection identifying students who must not be corrected.<sup>11</sup> It also includes a subsection on absences that urges the Brother to identify why a student is absent before correcting him, since the answer to the "why" question will point the way to the correction that will best assure that the student will be present at school on a regular basis.<sup>12</sup> In the midst of rather extensive detail and structure, the message is given again and again - *know your students!*

How does this element of the primacy of relationships translate into today? In principle as well as in practice, it translates very well. Just as the first teachers referred to themselves as "Brothers," stating their commitment to be brothers to each other and older brothers to the young people entrusted to their care, we, too, are called to be brothers and sisters to each other and older brothers and sisters to those entrusted to our care. We take time to get to know one another, we support each other in our educational ministry, and we spend time together in prayer and in conversation about how to help young people most effectively face the challenges that confront them in their lives.

We are older brothers and older sisters to the young people entrusted to us. We have experience and perspective and wisdom to offer them. And, in turn, they offer us their experience and perspective and wisdom. We hold them accountable, as older siblings should. We spend time getting to know them, and we let them get to know us. We work hard to identify the most effective ways to educate them. We work extra hours with them when that is what they need, and we let them figure it out for themselves when that is what they need. We know, as well as those first Brothers knew, that we must do everything we can to touch their hearts in order to provide an education that changes their lives for

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<sup>10</sup> *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*, 91.

<sup>11</sup> *The Conduct of the Christian Schools by John Baptist de La Salle*, 145-151.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 159-162.

the better. And the only way to their hearts is through relationships. As a wise, experienced administrator once told me following a Lasallian orientation for new teachers and staff, “we don’t teach mathematics, science, literature, or religion. We teach young people.” We are first and foremost concerned about the people confided to our care. We teach the content because of our concern for the current and future well-being of our students. Our love for a particular subject area comes second to empowering those entrusted to us to live lives of personal dignity and service.

#### **4. Our Founding Story.**

The fourth transformative element of our heritage invites us to return to a story I have alluded to throughout this reflection - the story of John Baptist de La Salle, the first Brothers, and the founding of the Christian Schools. One might look at the three fundamental elements I have articulated so far and say, “All Catholic schools aspire to do those things. What makes Lasallian schools different?” The more I think about this question, the more I return to our founding story. No other educational system has the same story as our founding story. This founding story continues to inspire and inform our work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In its particulars, it is a story of some men in the 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries who, through many trials and tribulations, began a system of schools to educate boys from poor and working-class families. Considered more broadly, however, this founding story contains several elements that shape how we approach education and how we approach students “entrusted to our care.” Allow me to highlight some elements of this story that I find particularly applicable today.

**A Fundamental Commitment.** As I look at John Baptist de La Salle’s life and the dramatic changes he experienced over his 67 years, one thing remained constant - his *commitment to following the will of God* as best he could discern it. From an early age, De La Salle believed that it was God’s work that he was called to do, and God would show him the work he was to do. So, from the beginning, De La Salle was motivated by something bigger than his own dreams and desires. In fact, in one of the resolutions he made during a retreat, he said, “*I will always regard the work of my salvation and the founding and governing of our community as the work of God. This is why I will abandon the care of both to*

him to bend myself only to his purposes. I will often seek his guidance to know what I must do for the one or the other. I will often repeat these words of the prophet Habakkuk: 'Lord, the work is yours.'<sup>13</sup> He saw his entire life as a response to a call from God to serve. Serve whom? Serve how? That would unfold over time...

**One Step at a Time.** This call that De La Salle speaks of is an *incremental call* - it is a call that reveals itself little by little, step by step, one commitment leading to another. You may recall that his first step into the educational service of the poor only involved his "connections" - he knew the right people to invite into a conversation with Adrian Nyel so he could open a school. That was it. Once he accomplished this task, De La Salle felt he had done his good deed for the day, month, or year and he could get back to his "real" work. However, one school became two schools became three schools. When Nyel left town to open other schools, De La Salle felt compelled to spend time with the school teachers who, he discovered, were not very well educated, very poorly trained as teachers, and spiritually rough. So, he began inviting them to his home for meals and conversation, which grew soon to an invitation to have them move in with him, which led them to...well, you know the story. Bit by bit he got drawn in - moved by the plight of these boys who needed an education. God slowly unveiled for De La Salle a passion for the educational service of the poor - a passion he did not know he had previously. This experience drew De La Salle to articulate his belief in a God who is not compelled to overwhelm people with impossible tasks, but rather who is gentle and persistent, meeting people always where they are at and persistently nudging them forward. In his own words,

*It was undoubtedly for this reason that God, who guides all things with wisdom and serenity, whose way it is not to force the inclinations of persons, willed to commit me entirely to the development of the schools. God did this in an imperceptible way and over a long period of time, so that one commitment led to another in a way that I did not foresee in the beginning.<sup>14</sup>*

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<sup>13</sup> John Baptist de La Salle, *Rules I Have Imposed Upon Myself*, as quoted in *John Baptist de La Salle: The Spirituality of Christian Education*, 225.

<sup>14</sup> John Baptist de La Salle, *Memoir on the Beginnings*, as quoted in *John Baptist de La Salle: The Spirituality of Christian Education*, 112.

***A Call to Community.*** De La Salle's statement points to the next significant element of the founding story: *an individual call evolves into a communal call.* De La Salle's conviction that God was calling him to assist with the opening of one school, then another school, then more, over many years led him to form a teaching community - a community of educators with a common commitment to the educational service of the children of the poor and working classes. Brother Antonio Botana notes that it is no accident that the first twelve Brothers who took vows with De La Salle in 1694 not only committed themselves to the educational mission, but also committed themselves to each other. They had been moving in that direction since 1680, as they gradually discovered the necessity of together approaching their ministry. Between 1682 and 1684, De La Salle gave up his canonry and his personal property not, principally, to feed the hungry, but to be more united with the teachers. Not long after this, the community gave itself a name - *Brothers of the Christian Schools* - to identify themselves as brothers to one another and older brothers to the youth confided to their care. In 1690, half the Brothers left the community, and the enterprise appeared headed for ruin. In faith and with courage, they ultimately made a radical decision to establish an *intentional community*, and the crisis passed. Little by little, through many ups and downs, God's call to form a community associated for the educational service especially, but not exclusively, of the poor became clear to them.<sup>15</sup>

***God Has Made Provision for This...*** At the opening of his Second Meditation for the Time of Retreat, De La Salle asks us to consider the plight of poor and working class families, especially of the children of these families. After laying out a fairly desperate picture, he makes two interesting statements:

- *"God has had the goodness to remedy so great a misfortune by the establishment of the Christian Schools..."*
- *"Thank God, who has had the goodness to employ you to procure such an important advantage for children."*<sup>16</sup>

It is a compelling belief behind these statements - first, that God

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<sup>15</sup> Antonio Botana, FSC, *Lasallian Association: The Ongoing Story*, MEL Bulletin #2 (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2003), 24-27.

<sup>16</sup> *Meditations*, 435.



is good, and second, that *God backs up the call to serve with a “remedy.”* Therefore, if we are called by God to this educational mission, then God will provide us with the ways to accomplish this mission. As the first Brothers and De La Salle discovered, the answer was not always readily apparent - but, in faith, they believed that the answer was there. They gained the freedom to be creative, innovative, and determined to find the answer. The result? In time, a system of education that has transformed millions of lives in the more than 300 years of its existence, and a Founder whose gift to young people, to education, to the Church, and to the world was recognized when he was proclaimed Patron Saint of All Teachers of Youth in 1950.

***The Road Straightens Out Behind You.*** As God’s call to De La Salle evolved over time, two things happened to De La Salle: first, he was *surprised* by the direction his life was taking; second, he saw *in retrospect* the design of God’s call playing itself out. These are very important aspects of the founding story. First, God’s wisdom is far beyond our own. We may have an idea of where our life is going and should go, but there is a larger wisdom at work and that wisdom is worth paying attention to. If De La Salle had not listened to God’s surprising movements in his life, he would have gone in a very different direction. And how did he know he had moved in the “right” direction? His prayer life informed him. He looked back over the developments in his life and the founding of the Christian Schools, and he concluded in faith that God knew what was going on all along. Looking back on his life strengthened his faith in the God who calls and also makes provision for one’s response to the call. This faith allowed De La Salle to continue to be bold and responsive to God’s call, not only for the rest of his life but also well beyond his death, as he assisted the Brothers in the process of electing one of their own to take over leadership of the community, thus better assuring the survival of the Christian Schools for many years to come, even up to the present day.

***A Story With Implications for Lasallians in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.*** In a recent article, Brother Antonio Botana suggests that we need to consider our Founding Story through the lens of myth in order for it to have power in our present reality. He says:

In reading this history there is a risk of simply seeing only the external, anecdotal story of long ago. If we do that we shall

miss the point of identity. We must read the original history as a myth, trying to understand what goes beyond the historical details and what in them has relevance to us now. In that way we can perceive in the community itinerary or journey of 1680 to 1690 a dynamism which changes it completely. In the same way we can see or guess at the feelings, attitude and proposals of those persons who now commit themselves, who face difficulties, who make new beginnings and who try to express their evolving identity without having adequate means or vocabulary to do so.

...When the first brothers, in 1684, chose the name "Brothers of the Christian Schools," they were proclaiming the very essence of their own identity, which is a fraternity for the educational mission, a ministerial fraternity, a union of persons for the mission.<sup>17</sup>

In what ways does this Founding Story inform our work today? First of all, our work is seen as a ministry to which we are called. We begin with this notion in our earliest formation activities with new employees. For some, they come to us already convinced that their "work" is in fact a ministry, a vocation that God has called them to. Their work in one of our ministries is simply the next chapter of the vocational journey, the next response to the call that has been guiding them for some time. For others, this notion is new to them, and they need time to grow into this understanding. Coming to understand and embrace our work in the context of "vocation" opens us up, allows us to ask the question, "Lord, what is it that you are calling me to in this Lasallian work? Why me, with these people, at this place, in the service of these people?" We live our way along to the answers to these questions, and the answers only become clear in hindsight. Each person enters our Lasallian world at a different starting point and with different life experiences. Each person moves forward into a greater understanding of the purpose of his/her ministry.

Our interactions with those entrusted to our care - children, adolescents, young adults, older adults - are also informed by our founding story. We work with them gently, patiently - meeting them where they are at and gently yet persistently leading them

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<sup>17</sup> Antonio Botana, FSC. *Lasallian Identity* (Unpublished manuscript, 2005), 6.

forward toward growth, understanding, integration, maturity. We address challenges optimistically, knowing that the solution is available and has only to be uncovered. We work tirelessly to find a place at the table for every one of our community members. We help all to a growing appreciation of God's abiding presence in our lives, in our relationships, in our communities, and in our world.

Seeing our work in this context of "vocation" also allows the community to wrestle, as did the first brothers, with these questions *together* - how can we best serve the needs of those entrusted to our care? Remember - the call is a communal call. We have been called to this ministry at this time and place from many corners of society, and we come together to accomplish our educational ministry. We support each other in our questions, we challenge each other with our insights and passions, and we toil together for the good of those we serve.

We approach our ministry with confidence that the God who has drawn us together is present with us always, nurturing us, gently nudging us, imperceptibly moving us forward, stretching us, embracing us in love. We come together for moments or days of prayer to remind ourselves of the God who calls us and the God who saves us and to, as De La Salle did, "consult extensively" as to what we are to do. We do this in a way consistent with our heritage - boldly moving ahead in the context of our Gospel and Lasallian roots while at the same time being respectful and mindful of the various faiths represented in our communities. Community is built little by little, step by step...

Remembering the presence of God, having a special concern for the poor, giving primacy to relationships, and connecting with our Founding Story - these are powerful elements of our Lasallian educational heritage. They have the potential to transform lives. As situations change, as needs evolve, as populations shift, we are challenged to revisit these elements and breathe new life into them so that we can bring life to those confided to our care.

## For Your Reflection

- What best helps you to remember the presence of God on a regular basis? How can you be more attentive to the presence of God in your life, in your world?
- In what ways do you attend to the needs of the poor in your Lasallian ministry? In what ways can your community be more responsive to the needs of those on the margins of society?
- Practically speaking, how do you go about building relationships with those entrusted to your care, be they young people or adults?
- What do you find most compelling about our founding story? What parallels do you find between the founding story and the story of your Lasallian ministry today?

## Conclusion

### **Looking Ahead in Faith and Zeal.**

I am privileged to be participating in an international gathering of Lasallians in Rome. During this month-long gathering, I have met wonderful, deeply committed individuals from Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, Mexico, Italy, Spain, the Philippines, Burkina Faso, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Madagascar, Malaysia, and the United States. We are all involved, at either local or District levels, with Lasallian formation for mission. As we slowly work our way through and around language barriers and cultural differences, one thing is already crystal clear: all of us have been “captured” by the call to make a difference in the lives of people in need through education. We have been so captured by this call that we passionately and animatedly share who we are and the mission of which we are a part with others through formation programs. It is exciting to consider that this group of 39 represents but a handful of people worldwide who provide programs of formation to strengthen the Lasallian Educational Mission. Such an experience reinforces my optimism as I look to the future of Lasallian education in the world. Our heritage is alive and well - rooted in a compelling founding story, constantly evolving to respond more effectively to the needs of those God has entrusted to us, growing in fidelity to the call which God has so lovingly issued to all of us. To be a part of furthering the mission of human and Christian education is a grace indeed.

In order to continue to accomplish our Lasallian educational mission, we must tell our story! We do this through formation programs that allow the story to be told, that allow participants to find their place in the story, that allow for discussion that strengthens a community’s place in the story, and that challenge communities to grow in their response to the mission. We must continue to create and enhance and revise these formation programs to meet the changing needs of Lasallians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Further, our formation programs must have impact beyond the local community. For example, as our Association with each other for the Lasallian educational mission grows, we must all be

ready to engage in serious, critical conversations related to the future of the Institute at all levels. To do so, we must know the mission, care deeply for the mission, and be firmly committed to the accomplishment of the mission. This deep caring and commitment cannot happen unless, somewhere along the way, “the” mission becomes “our” mission. Quality Lasallian formation is critical in helping this process along.

I am convinced of the tremendous value of our formation programs in terms of advancing the Lasallian mission. Not only are our works surviving, they are thriving - and new schools and other works are being added to the family around the world each year. Such growth does not happen by accident. It happens because of the dedication and spirit and faith of many people who have been formed into one family - the Lasallian family - to continue to respond to God’s call to love and serve young people, especially those who are poor, through education.

As I draw this reflection to a close, I am reminded of words written by De La Salle as he both looked back on the founding of the Institute and looked ahead to the future with the eyes of faith:

*Therefore, stir up your trust in the Lord’s infinite goodness, and honor God by leaving in the divine hands the care of your persons. Be not troubled about the present or disquieted about the future, but be concerned only about the moment you must now live. Do not let anticipation of tomorrow be a burden on the day that is passing. What you lack in the evening, the morning will bring you, if you know how to hope in God. God will work miracles rather than let you suffer want. In addition to the words of Jesus Christ, I offer you as proof the universal experience of the saints. Providence performs miracles daily, and they cease only for those who have no trust.*<sup>18</sup>

Little did John Baptist de La Salle know that he would be joining that community of saints who provide us with inspiring “proof” of God’s abiding presence in our lives and in our ministry. May we continue to look to one another, to our Founder, and through him to Jesus Christ, in faith and in hope as we embrace together the Lasallian educational mission.

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<sup>18</sup> John Baptist de La Salle, *Memoir on the Beginnings*, as quoted in *John Baptist de La Salle: The Spirituality of Christian Education*, 113.

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