



## REMEMBERING GOD'S PRESENCE AS FUNDAMENTAL MOVEMENT OF THE LASALLIAN SPIRITUALITY

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### Introduction

What does it truly mean when a Lasallian remembers the holy presence of God? The notion of presence of God is difficult and abstract in our human experience and reflection. It is a fundamental question that everyone may inquire. Where and how the presence of God can be found and felt? God is His infinity dwells in the finitude of humanity. His transcendence relates to man's experience of knowing, loving, dread, fear and all other essential human experiences. Thomas Aquinas once said, "*Nihil in intellectu quod non prius in sensu.*" Nothing comes to the mind without passing through the senses. Therefore, it is indeed difficult to form mental images of something or someone that which is not present to our senses and not completely perceived by a reality. However, antiquity and medieval times had spoken that the experience of God was also the most fascinated topic. Poets and dramatists have focused on it and specifically, philosophers and theologians have tried to explain it. Modern trends such as psychology and anthropology have also aided man's search for the experience of God's presence. In the context of the Lasallian spirituality and mission, the fundamental problem is, what does it truly mean when the Lasallians utter, "*Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God?*"

The Lasallian tradition teaches that one must begin every work by remembering the presence of God. It is an act of faith that allows a person to find and experience God present in all things. The Divine moves in all events and dimensions of life. For John Baptist de La Salle, the Founder of the Brothers of the Christians Schools, remembering God's presence is so essential in becoming an educator. He wanted his followers, both the Christian Brothers and the Lasallian partners, to be in the constant remembrance of God. In one of his letters dated May 15, 1701, De La Salle urged his Brothers, "*The remembrance of God's presence will be a great advantage in helping you and in inspiring you to do all your actions well.*"

Fundamentally, this paper attempts to examine and rediscover God's presence as the Lasallian core and movement by examining the core values of faith, zeal for service and communion in mission. It will examine these Lasallian core values as bases for understanding the movement of God's presence in the contemporary world and Church. It will answer the questions, is "*God's presence*" the core and movement of the Lasallian theology? Do the Lasallian core values of faith, zeal for service and communion in mission manifest an understanding and experience of God's presence? How does a Lasallian recognize the movement of God's presence in the social and moral aspect of one's life? What does it truly mean when Lasallians say, "*Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God?*" In the end, the paper will posit a challenge to every Lasallian to constantly remember the presence of God by living a good life as they carry out the mission of education in and off the school.

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<sup>1</sup> Trans. C. Molloy FSC and Ed. A. Loes FSC, *The Letters of John Baptist de La Salle*, (Toronto: Lasallian Publications, 2007). p. 20

The paper will be expository and reflective in nature coming from the library research and will present to a certain extent Saint John Baptist de La Salle's meditations and the document, *The Guiding Principles of the Philippine Lasallian Family*<sup>2</sup> as the primary source of proving contentions on the theological reflection of God's presence. It will also rediscover the theology of presence in the Judeo-Christian tradition that is based on the Scriptures. It will attempt to reflect God's presence in the biblical, theological, spiritual, sacramental, ecclesiological, moral, and social perspectives. It will also consult contemporary social and moral writings and reflections on the theology of God's presence. It will deal extensively and specifically with the Lasallian core values of faith as basis for theological and biblical reflections, zeal for service as for the sacramental interpretation and communion in mission as for the manifestations of the God's presence in the contemporary ecclesial, moral, and social life.

The paper will also provide points for personal reflection on how a Lasallian ministry brings us to the presence of God. It will help every Lasallian to carry out with so much generosity and devotion the mission of education. This work hopes to accompany every Lasallian in leading the school community in discovering and reflecting the presence of God. This work will validly confirm the distinct "*Lasallian spirituality and mission*" as seeing everything in the eyes of faith,<sup>3</sup> remembering God's presence, and trusting in the Divine providence and doing everything with passion to serve in the spirit of community.

## **Biblical Background**

Sacred Scriptures does not provide a systematic understanding of God. It rather gives testimonies and bears witness to the experience, which people had of God in various situations in life. Out of what the Scriptures offer, the development of the theology of presence comes from the selected elements of both the Scriptures and Tradition through various stages to see how this theology arises.

The Old Testament has borne witness to the invisible God, speaking to man in a distant manner. God revealed Himself through man's history in His hidden origin. God's presence was known through the prophets. It is a fact that the Old Testament is a religion of the word. It was in the word where God encountered man. It was the word through which Abraham received God's promise. It was the word through which Israelites were liberated from the slavery in Egypt. It was the word through which God's promise of the Savior was revealed. Thus, in the Old Testament, prophets were mediators between God and His people. They were instruments of God's presence, His loving plan. From the beginning, as God has made Himself known, His revelation opens for humanity the way to heavenly salvation, "*He manifested Himself from the very beginning to our first parents*"<sup>4</sup>, *created in His image and likeness*.<sup>5</sup> Hence, God's revelation invites man to a close communion with Him by responding in faith.

The Book of Genesis provides us the creation account, proclaiming to us that God is the Creator of the world and mankind.<sup>6</sup> This mystery of creation realizes the original dependence of all creatures in relation to a transcendent yet personal and active God, a Divine presence

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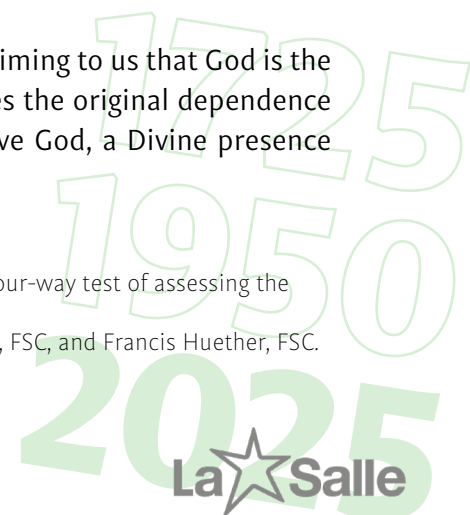
<sup>2</sup> The 1999 Lasallian District Synod of the Philippines produced this document as a four-way test of assessing the "*Lasallianness*" of every La Salle school.

<sup>3</sup> cf. Trans. by Richard Arnandez, FSC, and Augustine Loes, FSC. Ed. by Augustine Loes, FSC, and Francis Huether, FSC. *Meditations of John Baptist de La Salle*. (Lasallian Publications: Toronto, 2007) p. 19

<sup>4</sup> Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, 18 November, 1965, no. 3

<sup>5</sup> cf. Gen. 1:26

<sup>6</sup> cf. Genesis 1 and 2



who confers every creature a sacramental value.<sup>7</sup> God is a personal presence, once hidden, now revealed by signs. “By his covenant with Abraham<sup>8</sup> and, through Moses, with the race of Israel,<sup>9</sup> God did acquire a people for himself, and to them he revealed himself in words and deeds as the one, true, living God, so that Israel might experience the ways of God with men.”<sup>10</sup> The creation of the world, the liberation in Egypt and the event in Sinai involve the experience of the one, all-powerful God. These events were experiences of the presence of God, and the Hebrew people are in the constant remembrance of the presence of God in their Passover Meal because of those salvific events.

The foundation of the divine presence in the Old Testament is the conviction of the uniqueness of that universal, living, personal power, transcending the world and in no way subject to human manipulation, yet active in human history, which is called by the name “God.”<sup>11</sup> Monotheism is the greatest achievement of the Old Testament, establishing a truth that there is only one God who is actively creating and moving the world and humanity.

God’s presence in the Old Testament is characterized by transcendence and communication.<sup>12</sup> God is the presence who enters history by revealing Himself in creation, in words, and in events. The era of the prophets told us that the presence of the one true God was affirmed amidst the existence of other divinities. The Jewish people accepted the reality that there is only one true God who gave his presence in the salvific interventions in creation, in the Torah and through the prophets and this presence will one day send the Messiah to communicate in fullness the divine presence.

In the New Testament, God’s Word is no longer given through the prophets. God sent His Son, the eternal Word to reveal His presence in fullness. Thus, “*the Word became flesh*.”<sup>13</sup> There comes the fullness of revelation, His full presence. God, in revealing His presence, became man in and through Jesus Christ. God fully reveals Himself in the self-emptying of Jesus Christ on the cross. Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not deem equality with God. He made himself as a slave like any other man.<sup>14</sup> It is the mystery of faith that allows us to see the image of the Father in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. God is no longer a distant God, but the God who is with us, the “*Immanuel*.” He is the God who makes himself fully available for us. He is the God who wills not only to come for us but also the God who wants to be the victim for us. He is the God who made Himself taken, blessed, broken and given for us. He is the God who reconciled man to Himself by destroying sin and death and rising into new life. Therefore, he is the God who is always present with us, He in His divine presence, no more, no less.

The New Testament openly receives the idea of one true God. Its tradition proclaims that Jesus Christ is the eternal Word who became flesh and dwelt among us.<sup>15</sup> The presence in Christ that the kingdom of God in the Old Testament is now fully revealed in the New Testament.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Jean Danielou, SJ, *The Presence of God, A Translation of Le Signe du Temple* by Walter Roberts, (Baltimore Maryland: Helicon Press, 1960) p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> cf. Genesis 15:18

<sup>9</sup> cf. Exodus 24:8

<sup>10</sup> Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, 18 November, 1965, no. 14.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Schmaus, *Dogma 2: God and Creation, Volume 2*, (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1969) p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> cf. Yves Congar, OP, *The Mystery of the Temple, The Manner of God’s Presence to His Creatures*, (London: Burns and Oates, 1962) p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> cf. Jn. 1:14

<sup>14</sup> cf. Phil. 2:6-11

<sup>15</sup> cf. John 1:14

<sup>16</sup> cf. Mark 12:29; 1 Corinthians. 8:4; James 2:19; 1 Timothy 2:5

Jesus Christ is the image and presence of the invisible God.<sup>17</sup> The presence of God in human and bodily form began in the womb of the Virgin Mary from the moment when she declared her submission to the will of God. The Holy Spirit overshadowed her, and the presence of God on earth in our humanity had begun.<sup>18</sup> Thus, God's presence dwells in a corporeal form.

What is central to the preaching of Jesus is the Kingdom of God. Hope-filled faith, conditional love and compassionate justice are the messages of the Kingdom of God. The preaching of Jesus of the Kingdom of God is a proclamation of presence. John Paul II, in his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, teaches that the Kingdom of God has a face and it is the face of Jesus Christ. He further proclaims: *"It is in Christ that the kingdom itself became present and was fulfilled. The kingdom is not a doctrine; it is before all else a person with the face and name of Jesus of Nazareth, the image of the invisible God."*<sup>19</sup>

In the early Christian tradition particularly in the gospel, the presence of God is revealed in physical healing and in the forgiveness of sinners.<sup>20</sup> Central to Jesus' message is the notion of presence: [1] God's presence in Jesus himself, [2] God's presence in the body of the believers who unite in Jesus' name and teaching, and [3] God's presence in each person. Thus, the goal and meaning of Christianity is the recognition and enhancement of the sense of Divine presence, which in all three forms – the person of Jesus as the Christ, the community of believers, and the individual creature as a child and servant of God.<sup>21</sup>

The Old Testament experienced the presence of God as living and gracious, as the One who entered human history through creation, laws and the prophets. The New Testament confirms and fulfills the Old by establishing Jesus as the true living presence who became flesh. Thus, the presence of the God in the Old and New is the God who brings about the history of one's salvation.<sup>22</sup> *As God's presence was the heart of the Jewish spirituality, so it also formed the heart of the early Christian spirituality.*<sup>23</sup>

### **Remembering God's Presence, A Lasallian Spirituality**

The Judeo-Christian tradition provides three forms through which the presence of God is remembered – the person of God in Jesus Christ, the individual creature as child and servant of God and the existence of the believing community.<sup>24</sup> This tradition presents to us that Jesus introduced to us God as the Father. The Gospel of Matthew speaks, *"And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven."*<sup>25</sup> Jesus wants us to actively remember that communal relationship with the Abba and the salvific offering that he made on the cross.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, this remembrance is an act of faith, and He wants us to *"do this in memory of Him."*

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<sup>17</sup> cf. Colossians 1:15

<sup>18</sup> cf. Yves Congar, OP, *The Mystery of the Temple, The Manner of God's Presence to His Creatures*, (London: Burns and Oates, 1962) p. 133.

<sup>19</sup> John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, December 7, 1990, no. 18.

<sup>20</sup> cf. Matthew 19:26; Mark 14:36; Luke 1:37; Ephesians 3:20

<sup>21</sup> Richard Woods, *Christian Spirituality: God's Presence Through the Ages*, (Chicago: Thomas More Press, 1989) p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> cf. Michael Schmaus, *Dogma 2: God and Creation, Volume 2*, (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1969) p. 12-13; Acts 3:12-26; Hebrews 1:2.

<sup>23</sup> Richard Woods, *Christian Spirituality: God's Presence Through the Ages*, (Chicago: Thomas More Press, 1989) p. 13.

<sup>24</sup> cf. Michael Schmaus, *Dogma 2: God and Creation, Volume 2*, (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1969) p. 12-13; Acts 3:12-26; Hebrews 1:2.

<sup>25</sup> cf. Matthew 23:9

<sup>26</sup> cf. Luke 22:19

In the same way, Lasallian spirituality is an act of remembrance. A Lasallian will say, “*Let us remember that we are in the Holy Presence of God*”. Ordinarily, people think of remembrance as going back to the past. There was an event in the past that the present is looking back. However, remembrance in faith is an “*active remembrance*”. It is not going back to the past but instead it brings the past into the present. It actualizes a past reality. Likely, the Eucharist is an active remembrance of the salvific event of Jesus Christ. It perpetually realizes the Calvary event in the sacramental celebration of the here and now. It makes the Paschal mystery present in all ages and times. It is in the same way of active remembrance that every Lasallian becomes aware of the movement and existence of God today. A Lasallian brings about experience of God’s presence. A Lasallian recognizes the presence of God above all things. That consciousness of the Divine presence allows a person to discover “God’s active presence in the world in faith, to offer an enthusiastic and total gift of self and presence in service, and to recognize association as a sense of fidelity to God by experiencing God’s presence in communion.”<sup>27</sup>

This Lasallian spirit of remembering God’s active presence vivifies the deepest level of the appreciation of the mission and spirituality of John Baptist de La Salle in today’s contemporary world. It embodies the sum total of one’s knowledge, passion and sentiments in the Lasallian apostolate. The remembrance of God’s presence has become the source from which awareness; feelings, reverence, respect, hope, confidence and belief in the mission and spirituality have been embraced with full conviction. This remembrance as act of faith is the core of the Lasallian mission. It is the core that gives life and sustenance to the apostolate of education. It is the core from which emanates *the spirit of faith, the spirit of zeal for service, and the spirit of communion in mission*.<sup>28</sup>

The Lasallians, in remembering the presence of God by living the *spirit of faith*, become conscious of the Divine movement and transform one’s spirituality into a concrete apostolate of education. With the grace of the Lasallian *spirit of zeal for service*, one can become God’s presence, a human sacrament of the Divine, being shared in the mission of education. The “together and by association”<sup>29</sup> of the *spirit of communion in mission* is a way of recognizing the presence of God, actively moving in each member of the community.

### Seeing God’s Presence as an Act of Faith

In 2009, after being in the seminary formation, I entered a La Salle School in Antipolo to apply for a teaching position. Prior to my teaching demonstration in a class, the teacher asked a student to lead the class in a prayer. The student stood up and invited us to begin with a prayer. The student said, “*Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God.*” Silence fell over us in the room for about 20 seconds. I found myself deeply moved by the prayerful silence and words. So I began to question and reflect on the choice of words. The student did not say, “*Let us put ourselves in the presence of God*”, as others will do including myself, as if I were not truly in God’s presence. The student did not also begin by saying, “*Let us call upon God’s presence to be with us*”, as if God will only be present when he is summoned. Instead, the student certainly said, “*Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God.*” I realized that those words embody a declaration of faith that we are indeed in the holy presence of God, now and always. This is an act of faith and that assurance of God’s presence posits a challenge and

<sup>27</sup> Cf. *The Guiding Principles of the Philippine Lasallian Family*, Second Edition (Manila: La Salle Provincialate, 2009) p. 8-10

<sup>28</sup> These three encompasses the Lasallian spirit or core values.

<sup>29</sup> The term “together and by association” is traced back to the Heroic Vow that John Baptist de La Salle, Gabriel Drolin and Nicolas Vuyard made. It speaks of whatever happens, they will remain together in the mission of education.



invitation to constantly remember this reality of God, His omnipresence among us in whatever and whenever circumstances.

Lasallian history and tradition have told us that from the very beginning, the Brothers of the Christian Schools, followers of John Baptist de La Salle, recognized the presence of God. He and the first Brothers were guided by this act of faith to see every situation they were in. It was the spirit of faith that urged them to respond to the greatest need of their times, the education of the poor and neglected children. It was in the spirit of faith that De La Salle saw the vision and responding with a mission that providing human and Christian education was actually opening up heaven and salvation to these ones. His last words before he died, “*I adore the Holy Will of God in my regard*” speaks of the recognition and perpetual remembrance of the presence of God in faith.<sup>30</sup>

The Lasallian spirit of faith has fundamental concerns as regards to the theology of God’s presence. Why and how do Lasallians remember the presence of God in the dynamism of service and community? Why is there a need to recognize the Divine presence in understanding the Lasallian practice of faith? The spirit of faith is the answer to the deepest longing and finding of every Lasallian. De La Salle, in his meditation on the Epiphany, asked his followers to “*recognize Jesus beneath the poor rags of children entrusted to their care.*”<sup>31</sup> Thus, the Lasallian spirit of faith is remembering God’s presence by looking beyond what is presented, seeing beneath the surface and digging deeply what is under. When we, Lasallians, see the “poor rags” of our students, what we perceive are misbehaviors, abnormal attitude and apathy. If we look for problems, we will find problems. If we look for shortcomings, we will find shortcomings. If we look for failures, we will find failures. Therefore, the spirit of faith is an act of remembering and recognizing the presence of God by looking at the persons and events in our lives. If we look for God in every person and event, we will definitely find God. In today’s world when and where many young people struggles with the poverty of low self-esteem, scarcity of meaning in one’s life, lacking of a sense for God, the spirit of faith enables every Lasallian to recognize the goodness of the persons and the optimism of events unfolding. It is the kind of faith that is not only an assent to the Divine but also seeing the Divine present in the good our senses can perceive. Thus, every encounter with people and events is an encounter with God, an act of remembrance of His presence.

The Lasallian practice of faith by praying, “*Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God,*” posits a deeper understanding of God. It is a simple prayer yet provides a profound understanding of God. In the remembrance of God, a Lasallian is conscious of the movement of God in every facet of life. This Lasallian prayer does not express any form of rituals. It does not present a chaotic or confused theology. It does not provide questions for theological discussions. It simply expresses God in His presence and fullness. For the Lasallians, remembrance is the word for faith. Remembering God’s presence is the spirit that urges every Lasallian to seek and find God in the mission of education.

The Lasallian spirit of faith is a call for the celebration of God’s presence who is actively moving in one’s life and consciousness. For John Baptist de La Salle, remembering the presence of God is absolutely essential for the Lasallians to perform their educational duties well. He fills his writings with exhortations to remember God’s presence. In the *Explanation*

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. General Council. *Letter to the Lasallian Family*. (Rome, Italy, 1989) p. 15.

<sup>31</sup> Original Translation by Richard Arnandez, FSC; edited by and revised translation by Donald Mouton, FSC. *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*, by John Baptist de La Salle, (Landover: Christian Brothers Conference, 1995) 96.3

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>32</sup>

The Guiding Principles of the Philippine Lasallian Family speak of the spirit of faith as “the spirit that flows from the relationship of communion with the Triune God who wills to save all people by drawing them into a life-giving communion with him and with one another in the Lasallian tradition, the spirit of faith is the spirit that allows one to: discover God’s active presence in his Word, in men and women, in the poor, in nature, in history, and in ourselves;<sup>33</sup> judge and evaluate things in the light of the Gospel; search for God’s will in order to carry out his saving plan; unite one’s action to the on-going salvation of God in the world; and to trust in God’s loving presence and providence when acting or discerning God’s will.<sup>34</sup>

The Lasallian spirit of faith is the statement that God is indeed the God of present, not of the past and not of the future. It speaks of a very basic theology that God is with us<sup>35</sup>, the “*Immanuel*”,<sup>36</sup> the God who is and will never be separated by any circumstances of life.<sup>37</sup> It is an awareness of God’s presence that every Lasallian is alert to what God may ask of him.<sup>38</sup> The Lasallians are associated together to promote and become living signs or sacrament of the presence of God through education. The Brothers’ Rule says “the community should be home, a place of prayer, a house of unity and love, a spring of God’s presence.” In the community, the Lasallians “*seek God together.*”<sup>39</sup> Association and community gathered in prayer are the dynamic presence of God and the Lasallian tradition strives to educate towards a living faith,<sup>40</sup> an active remembrance of God’s presence.

At the end, in our human experience of love and rejection, trust and anxiety, certainty and doubt, we both search for and find God. In our own daily existence, we can move to an experience of the Divine. A great modern theologian, Karl Rahner, beautifully reflects how this spirit of faith works in the contemporary world. He argues that the focus for our experience of God has shifted from the outer world to existence. In the earlier times, it was the external world with its orders that provided the initial start for man experience of transcendence. Today, it is his existence with its unfathomable depths.<sup>41</sup> However, daily experience tends to become routine that we forget to look on everything with the eyes of faith. While we, as Lasallian say, “*Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God,*” only through a marriage of God and of our real experience do these words take on meaning for us.<sup>42</sup>

### **Becoming God’s Presence, A Sacramental Perspective**

The history of the Church has provided us discussions and debates regarding the issues of divinity and humanity. There is a perennial argumentation on how these two seemingly

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<sup>32</sup> Original Translation by Richard Arnandez, FSC; edited by and revised translation by Donald Mouton, FSC. *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*, by John Baptist de La Salle, (Landover: Christian Brothers Conference, 1995) p. 25.

<sup>33</sup> From the Letter of the Superior General, Br. Alvaro Rodriguez Echevarria FSC to the Young Lasallians in July 200

<sup>34</sup> *The Guiding Principles of the Philippine Lasallian Family*, Second Edition (Manila: La Salle Provincialate, 2009) p. 8.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Matthew 1:23

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Isaiah 7, 8

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Letter of Paul to Romans 8:35

<sup>38</sup> Michael Valenzuela FSC. *Living the Lasallian Spirit, Our 3 Lasallian Prayers, Second Edition.* (La Salle Provincialate: Manila, 2008) p. 8.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Ed. Timothy McCarthy FSC. *Life Together, A Study of Religious Association.* (Lockport: Illinois, 1978) p. 3

<sup>40</sup> Michael Valenzuela FSC. *The Faith Community: Towards a Paradigm for Evangelization and Catechesis in the Lasallian Schools.* (De La Salle Brothers of the Philippines: Manila, 1999) p. 17.

<sup>41</sup> Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations vol. XI*, (New York: Seabury Press, 1965) 162.

<sup>42</sup> John Baptist de La Salle, *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, Augustine Loes, FSC., trans. and ed. (Winona: Christian Brothers Conference, 1975) p. 60.

opposing realities can be reconciled into a one single box. How can a divine reality become a human reality? How can a human reality become a tool for Someone who is divine and perfect? Divine and human realities find their reconciliation in the Sacrament for it is the sign and the act where the divine and human meet.

Western theology, specifically Augustine, defines sacrament as a sign or symbol. It is a visible sign, a perceptible symbol of something invisible and sacred and this reality bears grace, God's free gift of himself to human. And all these things find realization in the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>43</sup> Hugh of Saint Victor provided one of the earliest definitions of the sacrament when he wrote: "*Sacramentum est corporale vel material elementum foris sensibilter propositum ex similitudine repraesentans, et ex institutione significans, et ex sanctificatione continens aliquam invisibilem et spiritualem gratiam.*"<sup>44</sup> (A sacrament is a corporal or material element, proposed in a sensibly perceptible way, representative on the basis of its likeness, significative on the basis of its institution, and incorporative on the basis of its holiness of some invisible and spiritual grace.) These definitions constitute the traditional understanding of the Sacraments in the Church as they also provide misconceptions, which limit the Sacraments as mere rituals.

In the book, *Becoming Church, Being Sacrament*, written by Jose M. de Mesa and Rebecca G. Cacho, the two Filipino theologians stress the need to distinguish between a sacramental attitude and the sacramental thinking.<sup>45</sup> We, as a Catholic Christians, are well verse in the sacramental thinking. We memorize and appreciate the seven instituted sacraments in the Church. However, the sacramental attitude is to recognize and experience God's presence beyond the rituals in and of the Church. The book explains, "*Sacramental attitude believes and discerns the all-pervasive presence of the divine in life and in the world. This implies that God is experienced in our history and cultures, in our created world, in the most ordinary and in all that is life giving. All that helps us have a glimpse of the divine are "doors to the sacred."*"<sup>46</sup> Thus, a sacrament is that which reminds us and brings us the presence of God, the God who is close to us, the God who is with us, *the Immanuel*.<sup>47</sup>

In one of the meditations of John Baptist de La Salle, he implicitly argues the sacramental character of a minister of God. He said, "*The minister is acting for God, is motivated by God, and is even chosen by God. Sincere people do minister for the God they experience.*"<sup>48</sup> In this way, John Baptist de La Salle believes that whoever acts for God in service is becoming the sacrament of the Divine presence. God continually enters our history, time and space, by making His presence communicated and revealed in the act of ministry. Hence, De La Salle believes that the ministry becomes a point of contact between the divine and human, between the God who cares and loves and a human who suffers and needs help. When one lives the spirit of zeal for service, one becomes a meeting point of the divine and the human. One becomes a human sacrament. Thus every Lasallian has to be a pendulum where divinity and humanity intertwine by living the spirit of zeal for service.

Every Lasallian says with a lively faith, "*I will continue, O my God, to do all my actions for the love of you.*" This is a simple prayer and yet contains a profound truth of the

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. Kenan B. Osborne, OFM. *Sacramental Theology, A General Introduction*. (Paulist Press: New York, 1988) p. 7.

<sup>44</sup> De sacramentis christianae fidei, 1, 9, 2.

<sup>45</sup> Jose de Mesa and Rebecca Cacho. *Becoming Church, Being Sacrament*. (St. Scholastica's College: Manila, 2012.) p. 75.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid

<sup>47</sup> Ibid

<sup>48</sup> John Baptist de La Salle, *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, Augustine Loes, FSC., trans. and ed. (Winona: Christian Brothers Conference, 1975) p. 13.



meaning of service. *“I will continue”* is an act of availability and openness. It opens one’s life to both the certainties and uncertainties of Christian vocation. It is a prayer of service that does not posit obligation and duty but a self-initiating response to the call of God. *“Doing all my actions for the love of you”* reminds every Lasallian of the motivation of service and of the very identity of Jesus, that is, doing everything in the loving obedience to the Father.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, the Lasallian spirit of zeal for service is a service of presence. It is a sacrament of God’s presence. John Baptist de La Salle, in his meditation, gives flesh to the Lasallian spirit of zeal for service. *“Since you are ambassadors and ministers of Jesus Christ in the work that you do, you must act as representing Jesus Christ Himself. He wants your disciples to see him in you and receive your teaching as if he were teaching them. They must be convinced that the truth of Jesus Christ comes from your mouth, that it is only in his name that you teach, that he has given you authority over them.”*<sup>50</sup> In his meditations, De La Salle implicitly argues the sacramental character of the zeal for service.

The Guiding Principles of the Philippine Lasallian Family speak of the spirit of zeal for service as “the active expression of faith in Gospel witness and service. It is oriented towards the integral salvation of persons, particularly the poor and the excluded. Zeal is enthusiastic and total gift of self for the sake of the mission expressed in such qualities as gratuity and generosity, creativity and fortitude, compassion and commitment. It involves a preferential option for the poor and vulnerable. The desire to be of greater service to others conditions the quest for excellence and continuous self-improvement.”<sup>51</sup>

Therefore, for the Lasallians, spirit of zeal for service is not an option but a fundamental and concrete translation of the spirit of faith. It is a sacramental expression of the remembrance of God’s presence. It is the active praxis of remembering God’s presence by making others encounter God’s presence in the spirit of service. It proclaims that faith does not limit itself to acknowledging God and responding to Him in prayer. It must be recognized in good works. Faith is not only a capacity to respond to God’s revelation and presence but the act of genuine service to others especially the needy. Hence, the spirit of faith is evidently realized in the spirit of zeal for service. Lasallians do not only remember God’s Presence in faith but they bring and become the same Presence in the spirit of zeal for service. They become a sacrament of God’s presence to others.

Sacraments in the Church are living signs. In layman’s term, signs can be natural. For instance, smoke is a sign of fire; it points to fire, and it may lead us to the fire, but it is not the fire itself. Some people especially drivers rely on signs. They made signs that are agreeable to all people like red light in the traffic sign. However, signs can also become supernatural and this is the kind of signs that we deal in sacraments. It is because signs in the sacraments do not merely point to a reality but take us to the presence of God. Sacramental signs are not pointing out to what is distant but they are bringing us to the core of sacramental signs who is Jesus Christ, the fullness of the Divine presence.

In the spirit of zeal for service, the Lasallians, in the simple and yet profound actions, become a living and supernatural sign by becoming blest, broken and shared in the mission of education. The Lasallian mission does not only point to a certain purpose that is to teach the minds, touch the hearts and transform the lives, but our mission fills the greatest famine of our time, the hunger and thirst for God. Every Lasallian becomes a sign of unity, love and

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<sup>49</sup> cf. John 17

<sup>50</sup> De La Salle, *Meditation for the Time of Retreat*, (Saint Mary’s College Press, Winona: Minnesota, 1975) No. 3, p. 54.

<sup>51</sup> Guiding Principles of the Philippine Lasallian Family, Foreword, p. 8, 1999

peace, gifts of God's presence. The spirit of zeal for service challenges every Lasallian. It is a reminder that in embracing the Lasallian mission by living the spirit of zeal for service, each is also becoming living signs, living sacraments to other people especially to the students in the school community. Therefore, sacraments are not only affairs or rituals inside the church. Sacraments are not only the exclusive function of the ordained. Sacraments can indeed teach minds, touch hearts and transform lives if the Lasallians can become sacraments to others by becoming God's presence in the mission of education.

### **Living God's Presence, An Ecclesial Perspective**

The Book of Samuel presents to us God who told David not to build a house for he dwells in the midst of the people of Israel whom he brought out of Egypt.<sup>52</sup> Saint Paul, in his letters, presents the image of the ecclesial community as a spiritual temple of the God. Therefore, from the very beginning, God desires that he may be found in the presence of the community. Jesus in the gospel also proclaims that if two or three are gathered in his name, He is in their midst present.<sup>53</sup> Community is the suitable place for the divine indwelling.

God in Himself is a community. He is a union of the Father, of the Son and of the Spirit. And this community is not only a community within the persons of the Trinity but also the indwelling of God in each human being and consequently in the society at large. Such a reflection allows us to discover that the Divine union of presence calls humanity to have a great longing for communion. Thomas Dubay, in book, *The Indwelling of Divine Love*, writes, *"God's proper dwelling is not the temple of stone. Humanity is the only suitable place in visible creation for God's indwelling. If the glorification of the earth is the result of its orientation to man, and if the transformation of man is due to his immersion in the beauty of indwelling Father, Son and Holy Spirit, it follows that the final splendor of the whole universe is a consequence of the Trinitarian dwelling in man, the pinnacle of visible creation."*<sup>54</sup> Communion is getting prominent since it is a sign and fruit of love of God's presence. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, speaks that Jesus Christ who is present in the Church is the sign and instrument of intimate communion of God and humanity.<sup>55</sup>

The Guiding Principles of the Philippine Lasallian Family speak of both "communioninmission" and "communionasmission".<sup>56</sup> It further explains, "communion recalls the dynamic of association by which the first Brothers bonded together for the sake of the particular mission entrusted to them by God. Communion has four dimensions. As a relationship with God, it is the source of all mission and ministry; as a way of accomplishing the mission, it suggests the solidarity and collaboration that comes from sharing in one vision, one spirit and one mission; as a way of relating to others, it suggests openness to all persons and the desire to be brother or sister to all especially those in need; as a goal of mission, it suggests the unity that comes from reconciliation between God, human beings and creation."<sup>57</sup>

In the article 39 of the Rules of the Brothers, it reads, *"The distinctive character of the Lasallian community is to be a community of faith where the experience of God is shared."* Hence, every Lasallian community becomes a "little church", a domestic church where the Divine

<sup>52</sup> Cf. 2 Samuel 7:5-6

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Matthew 18:2

<sup>54</sup> Thomas Dubay. *The Indwelling of Divine Love: The Revelation of God's Abiding Presence in the Human Heart*. Vol. 4 (Letter & Spirit: 2008) p. 188

<sup>55</sup> cf. Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, 21 November, 1964, no. 1.

<sup>56</sup> *Guiding Principles of the Philippine Lasallian Family*, Foreword, p. 8, 1999

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

dwells and is experienced and shared. Along with this, the community becomes a sign of God's presence, a divine transparency. In this way, the spirit of communion provides us a Lasallian ecclesiology where we recognize Jesus living in the hearts of every person we encounter and this gives us our own way of existence, struggles and victories as a community of faith and service.

To speak of a Lasallian ecclesiology, one must understand the dynamism of remembering God's presence in the spirit of faith, becoming and sharing God's presence in the spirit of zeal of service and the indwelling of God's presence in the spirit of community. Lasallian ecclesiology is a community that leads every member to the experience of God. She can only lead each member to that divine presence if as a community of faith; each person will search for and constantly remember God and do God's will. A Lasallian community may recognize this contextualized ecclesiology but all remains a concept and can only be actualized if there is a true dynamism among the members of the Lasallian community.

The Lasallian principle on communion posits the reality that the Lasallians recognize the presence of God in every person. The Lasallian mission of providing human and Christian education is fully realized in the recognition of God's presence among individuals. The communion is indispensable part of the ministry. In the vows made by John Baptist de La Salle, it is evident that from the very beginning of the Institute, the founder already made communion as part of the Lasallian mission.

"Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, prostrate with the most profound respect before your infinite and adorable majesty, I consecrate myself entirely to you to procure your glory as far as I am able and as you will require of me. And for this purpose, I, John Baptist de La Salle, priest, promise and vow to unite myself and to live in Society with brothers, to keep together and by association gratuitous schools, wherever they may be, even if I were obliged to beg and to live on bread alone, or to do anything in the said Society at which I shall be employed, whether by the body of this Society or by Superiors; which vows of association, as well as stability in the said Society, and of obedience, I promise to keep inviolably all my life. In testimony whereof I have signed. Done at Vaugirard, this 6<sup>th</sup> day of June, feast of the Holy Trinity, in the year one thousand six hundred and ninety four. – De La Salle"<sup>58</sup>

When the Lasallians pray, "*Live Jesus in our hearts, forever,*" it is not only a prayer of being one with God but a recognition that God is present in each one who shares the same mission and that Presence is the source and goal of communion. When Lasallians serve the mission of education, one is opening oneself in communion with God, with the students and with the fellow Lasallians. Lasallian communion is the acceptance of the presence of the God in all persons.

The Lasallian spirit of communion is an expression of contemplation and awareness that God indeed dwells within all individuals. It is to see others as those who are part of the Lasallian spirituality and mission. Saint Paul, in his letters to the Galatians, speaks of the

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<sup>58</sup> Ed. Timothy McCarthy FSC. *Life Together, A Study of Religious Association*. (Illinois: Lockport, 1978) p. 11.

*“knowledge on how to make rooms for others, bearing each others’ dreams and burdens.”*<sup>59</sup> Lasallian communion is a manifestation of a church where all giftedness come from one Spirit, all live the same spirituality, all serve the same mission and all recognize God’s indwelling in each one. The spirit of communion is undeniably the presence of God in the depths of all experiences and in encounters with all peoples.

### **Acting in God’s Presence, A Social Perspective**

The experience of God’s presence is a communal reality yet a personal religious occurrence. This personal religious experience may be subjective in nature for it provides judgment to someone who perceives God’s presence because this God enters one’s personal life and concerns. In view of this subjective experience of the divine, one may perhaps validly question the relevance of God’s presence in the social trappings of the contemporary society. How can the presence of God posit challenges, reflections or perhaps solutions to the signs of the times?

Social concerns and imagination can help every Lasallian community to achieve an integrated spirituality and mission. In remembering God’s presence in the signs of the times, the revelation of God in the current social concerns is an indispensable tool. Society is the most important point of the signs of the times where as a community of faith and service, a privileged piece of God’s revelation is presented to us.<sup>60</sup> God’s presence is active in the world, revealing and calling us through social movements and developments. It only speaks of the reality that God is acting in the world of today. Again, social events are privileged sources of divine revelation.

The Lasallian Guiding Principles on Social Development Framework brings forth the awareness and the deeper understanding of social realities.<sup>61</sup> It urges every Lasallian community to have a greater sensitivity on the realities of social issues and the role to effect liberating action<sup>62</sup> on human suffering. These sad realities are intrinsically opposed to the fullness of life that the Divine presence offers. Thus, every Lasallian community is summoned to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor, the privileged and the oppressed. The signs of the times compel every Lasallian to call for dramatic changes in today’s society. For instance, the concern for social justice is rooted in the experience of both God’s presence and current social situations. The Christian faith is the belief not in the solitary and unequal reality but in the Trinity, a community of Divine persons, a divine solidarity and equality. This is the social being of the God whom every Lasallian remembers in faith. He is the God who inspires us to remodel every community according to the divine attributes of equality and cooperation. To remember God’s presence means that every Lasallian is committed to work for an equal and just society.

In a society, God reveals Himself not only in the midst of retreats and recollections or in the sacraments in the Church but His presence can be experienced more from the concerns of the society. He speaks, for instance, in friends who question your motives and desires, in enemies who pin you down and label you, in families who care but respect your uniqueness and liberty, in a fellow worker who suffers, in teachers who support your actions, in students who challenge every educational institutions, in outcast and poor who cry for justice and so on and so forth. The signs of the times tell us that God’s presence is revealed and remembered in social events, in social movements, in social concerns.

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<sup>59</sup> Cf. Galatians 6:2

<sup>60</sup> Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World no. 11

<sup>61</sup> *The Guiding Principles of the Philippine Lasallian Family, Second Edition* (Manila: La Salle Provincialate, 2009) p. 21

<sup>62</sup> Cf. *Ibid* p. 22

The experience of God in the signs of the times is so relevant for it becomes a meeting point of the Divine and the contemporary social world and that encounter is the privileged experience of God today. Saint John Baptist de La Salle indeed has shown us the possibility of the meeting point of God's presence and the signs of the times. In remembering God's presence, his faith responded to the needs of his time, the salvation of the poor children through the apostolate of education. His establishment of the Brothers' institute had provided opportunities to address the perennial problem of the society, education of the poor and neglected children.<sup>63</sup> Thus, the Lasallian mission is a way to direct attention of the Christian responsibility to labor for peace, prosperity, freedom, and justice in the world. If we are truly devoted to these aspects of being a Lasallian, we must seek to realize these values on earth. This implies not only that we should administer to individuals in need but also, it would seem, that we should, to the extent of our competence, contribute to the reform of social and political institutions that are the cause of hunger, thirst and injustice in the world.

Every Lasallian community is blessed and enriched through faith and zeal for service by God's presence. The experience of the divine presence moves us to look around as a community and as an individual. The remembrance of God's presence makes every Lasallian community attentive and sensitive to the signs of the times, discovering God in the midst of social concerns and working towards the full realization of the Trinitarian community through communal and individual justice and love. As followers of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, our remembrance of God in today's contemporary world, as guided by the Lasallian spirit of faith, zeal for service and communion in mission, is our initial response to the signs of the times. Being a Lasallian community truly requires *"together and by association"*. If every school community turns away from this, we fail to remember God's presence and His contemporary call to act. By praying, *"Live Jesus in our hearts, forever."* we make it close to our hearts God's presence made available to us in the signs of the times. By remembering God's presence in the contemporary social concerns, we fully realize Saint John Baptist de La Salle's mission and spirituality.

At the end of day, the gospel tells us that the most important thing in faith and service is the intensity of our response to the hungry, the unemployed, the naked, the stranger, the concrete service to least among us.<sup>64</sup>

### **Sharing in God's Presence, A Moral Call**

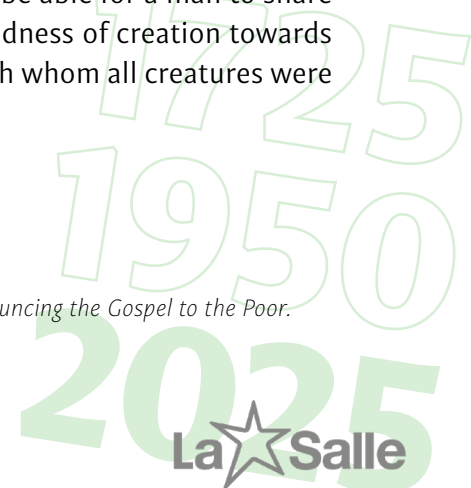
Moral law presents both the glorification and dethronement of human nature. In the realm of creation, God, in creating human beings, does not only give breath of life but also intelligence or rationality.<sup>65</sup> God's intention in creation was that man should come to Himself. It is not as if God first of all created the world and then decided on a goal for it, but he first set the goal, and the form of creation was decided by the goal that is to be able for a man to share in the divine presence of God. The highest realization of this directedness of creation towards God took place in Jesus Christ, the fullness of God's presence, through whom all creatures were reconciled and brought back to God.

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<sup>63</sup> Michael Sauvage, FSC and Miguel Campos, FSC. *Saint John Baptist de La Salle: Announcing the Gospel to the Poor.* (Romeoville, IL: Christian Brothers National Office, 1981) p. 3-37 and 137-178.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Matthew 25:35-40

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Genesis 2:7





The desire of God to be in communion with his creatures, specifically, humankind cannot just be realized through rituals in the sacraments of the Church. Sacraments point us to the reality of God and should keep us spiritually alive. John Baptist de La Salle, in one of his meditations, spoke, “The Lasallian language to instruct, to teach, and to guide cannot be reduced to a strict concept of dogma and worship but it should spring from the forming of conscience that will lead to live a moral life. These Lasallian expressions are all aimed at creating a life according to the Christian morals, an expression that constantly returns to Jesus’ way of living a moral life.”<sup>66</sup>

As Christians, we find our human nature as good.<sup>67</sup> We regard ourselves as created in the image of God. We are God’s presence, his image and likeness sent into the world. In fact, we find our vocation as a call to love, a call to participate in the saving activity of God. Hence, with this understanding of our nature as created by God, moral law is a call for all to freely and consciously participate and share in the eternal presence of God. Law here is not understood as prohibition. Moral law is not applied as rules and punishments. But law as the one refers to the nature, the image and likeness of God’s presence. Therefore, moral law is a call, a freedom and knowledge to participate in the Divine presence.

As we, Lasallians, strive to live a good Christian life, we are all called to actively participate and share with God’s presence so that we may become His living presence in the world. This human and divine participation is the very goal and reason why we are created, that man should come to God. Moral law, therefore, is God’s initiative for man. It is an invitation to act according to human intellect and will. It is God’s revealing presence that urges man to do what he is ought to do. Though, eternal law is reserved for God alone, moral law is His invitation that we constantly remember His presence in the choices that we consciously make.

With the call of moral law, in remembering God’s presence, every Lasallian is called to a simple task yet difficult and that is to be God’s presence in the world and this would only be happened if we, as a school community, are participators of the goodness, love and holiness of God. Moral law is indeed relevant in living the Lasallian mission and spirituality. It is the freedom and the knowledge which allows every Lasallian to consciously remember God’s presence in every human act.

## Conclusion

In affluent, well-off institutions such as La Salle Schools in the urban, a growing tendency of departing from the spiritual and missionary identity is inevitable. Educational professionalism may sadly diminish what is so called a “ministerial teaching,” a way of educating students to help them imbibe the sense for God. Lasallian traditions and values are springs of the knowledge and experience of God and a Lasallian educator must always bring the reality of God’s presence in every school through the act of remembrance in faith.

This paper has provided points for reflections for every Lasallian to constantly remember the presence of God in all things. It revisits the dynamics and elements of God’s presence in the Lasallian core values of faith, zeal for service and communion in mission by rediscovering this Living Presence through the Scriptures, revelation, sacraments, and the social and moral participation. It helps in the discernment of John Baptist de La Salle’s

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<sup>66</sup> John Baptist de La Salle, *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, Augustine Loes, FSC., trans. and ed. (Winona: Christian Brothers Conference, 1975) p. 421.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Genesis 1:31

invitation to discover God's presence in the contemporary world and Church. It reflects on how the ministry of education has been redemptive as one seeks God in a Lasallian way of remembrance in faith.

A person may be well educated in the systematic theological traditions, well trained in the professional skills required by a position or maybe guided by well-defined principles in life, but all these things do not simply make a person a Lasallian. So, who and what is a Lasallian?

In the spirit of faith, a Lasallian is the one who sustain a life of faith that recognizes the presence of God in all things. Scriptures and Christian theology have provided points to the reflections on the Lasallian spirit of faith. In the spirit of zeal for service, a Lasallian is a channel of God's presence, a human sacrament of the divine. The understanding and appreciation of the instituted sacraments in the Church transcend the sacramental thinking into a sacramental attitude by becoming living signs and symbols that brings about the presence of God by doing the Lasallian mission of education. In the spirit of communion, a Lasallian is the one who have a sense of unity by seeing God in the life and work of others. It expresses a community of faith, a domestic church who manifest God's presence in the contemporary social and moral life.

The core values of faith, zeal for service and communion in mission are fundamental to the Lasallian identity and this identity is the presence of God, unfolding in the ecclesial, social and moral realities when one sees everything in the eyes of faith, when one zealously effect liberating action in service and when one associates oneself in communion.

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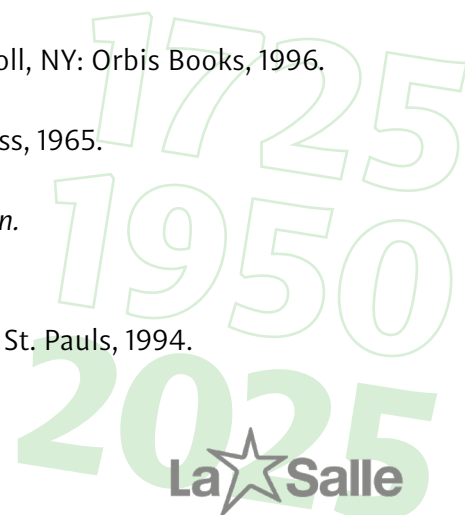
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