

Santuario de La Salle as Visual Catechesis: Evangelization Through Simplicity in Architecture

Religious architecture has historically functioned not merely as a venue for liturgy but as a powerful medium of catechesis—teaching through form, symbol, and space. As sacred art, it embodies theological truths, fosters contemplation, and invites deeper engagement with the mysteries of faith (Kieckhefer, 2004). The Santuario de La Salle, situated within the De La Salle University – Laguna Campus in Biñan, Laguna, exemplifies this principle through a contemporary Lasallian lens. Rooted in the charism of St. John Baptist de La Salle, the Santuario is not just a physical structure for communal worship; it is a living catechism—an architectural proclamation of the Lasallian mission, values, and theological vision.

As a space intentionally designed for stillness, simplicity, and sacred encounter, the Santuario embodies the pedagogical spirit of Lasallian formation: educating minds, touching hearts, and transforming lives. This article argues that the Santuario de La Salle operates as a distinct form of visual catechesis, where architecture itself becomes a form of instruction, and minimalist aesthetics convey profound theological meaning. Through its use of natural light, austere materials, clean lines, and restrained symbolism, the Santuario cultivates a spiritual atmosphere that draws attention to interiority, silence, and presence—guiding worshippers toward an embodied encounter with the divine.

In an age marked by digital saturation and the waning efficacy of traditional catechetical methods, sacred spaces like the Santuario offer alternative and affective forms of evangelization. They do not rely on words but on aesthetic experience, inviting individuals to perceive and dwell in mystery. The Santuario de La Salle reminds us that in both architecture and faith, "less" can indeed reveal more—that the sacred can be encountered not only in grandeur, but in intentional simplicity.

Theological Foundations of Visual Catechesis

A. Sacred Spaces as Silent Catechists

The built environment has long been considered a “silent teacher” within the Catholic tradition, shaping theological consciousness not through explicit instruction but through the symbolic and affective language of space (Kieckhefer, 2004). From the grounded weight of Romanesque churches to the soaring verticality of Gothic cathedrals and the immersive drama of Baroque basilicas, architectural forms have reflected—and formed—ecclesiological and cosmological understandings. Sacred architecture does not merely house the liturgy; it incarnates theological worldviews, expressing beliefs about divine transcendence, the sacramental order, and the communal nature of salvation.

In this tradition, the Santuario de La Salle, situated within the DLSU Laguna Campus in Biñan, Laguna, engages in this architectural catechesis by offering a radically minimalist aesthetic that privileges simplicity, silence, and interiority. These are not merely design choices; they are theological affirmations. The architectural choices made—unadorned walls, open floor plan, and deliberate play of light—invite the worshipper to enter into an experience of contemplative

presence, resonating with the biblical tradition of encountering God not in noise and spectacle, but in the “still small voice” (1 Kings 19:12).

Echoing Bishop Robert Barron’s (2011) assertion that sacred architecture should serve as a “lens” through which the divine mystery is glimpsed, the Santuario functions as a spatial homily. The journey through its doors, the slow unfolding of light and shadow, the subtle gradations of space—all function liturgically and pedagogically. The Santuario becomes a metaphor for the spiritual journey: from fragmentation to wholeness, from exterior busyness to interior stillness, from worldliness to sanctification.

B. Visual Catechesis from Tradition to Modernity

The Catholic Church has always understood the pedagogical power of the visual. In periods when literacy was rare, sacred spaces themselves became didactic environments—the so-called *Biblia Pauperum* or “Bible of the Poor” (Jungmann, 1959; Belting, 1994). Through stained glass windows, painted vaults, and sculpted portals, the Church communicated salvation history, theological concepts, and eschatological hope. The Second Council of Nicaea (787 AD) formally upheld the use of sacred images as instruments of instruction and veneration, and Vatican II’s *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963) reaffirmed the integral role of sacred art and architecture in expressing the mysteries celebrated in the liturgy.

Contemporary sacred architecture, however, faces the challenge of engaging a visually saturated but theologically fragmented culture. In this context, the Santuario de La Salle exemplifies a modern visual catechesis that does not rely on ornate iconography but rather on the symbolic power of spatial experience. Drawing from Mitchell’s (2010) insight that modern sacred architecture must evoke a “sense of the sacred” through proportion, materiality, and light, the Santuario invites reflection through what it withholds as much as through what it reveals.

Its clean lines and uncluttered interior do not suggest absence but intentionality—an architecture of humility that mirrors the kenosis (self-emptying) of Christ (Philippians 2:7). The worshipper is not overwhelmed by image but drawn into an encounter shaped by quiet attentiveness. This form of catechesis is immersive and embodied, engaging not only the intellect but also the senses, emotions, and memory.

C. Lasallian Spirituality and Visual Formation

At the heart of Lasallian spirituality is a pedagogy rooted in presence, simplicity, and transformative education. St. John Baptist de La Salle envisioned education as a sacred vocation—a means not merely of intellectual instruction but of spiritual formation, especially for the young and the poor. His writings emphasize clarity, humility, and the integration of faith and life: “Preach by your example, and practice before the eyes of the young what you wish to inculcate in their hearts” (La Salle, 1994, p. 53). This incarnational vision finds architectural resonance in the Santuario de La Salle.

Here, the architectural “curriculum” is one of spatial formation. The Santuario’s minimalist design is not empty; it is formationally rich, reflecting the Lasallian ideals of clarity, interiority, and

accessibility. It communicates the sacred not through overwhelming grandeur but through contemplative invitation. Its architecture affirms that God's presence is best discerned through attention and simplicity—virtues central to the Lasallian educator's mission.

Furthermore, Lasallian formation extends beyond cognitive instruction to encompass the affective and spiritual dimensions of the human person. In this light, the Santuario becomes a space of integrated formation—a chapel that “touches hearts” not just through homilies or hymns, but through the totality of its atmosphere. It teaches without words, forming the Lasallian community by inviting every student, teacher, and visitor into an ongoing experience of quiet grace, humility, and divine encounter.

The Santuario de La Salle: A Minimalist Catechism in Space

A. Architecture as Evangelization

The Santuario de La Salle's architectural language is one of restraint, clarity, and invitation. Its simplicity is not merely a stylistic choice, but a theological and catechetical statement. Rooted in monastic and Cistercian design principles, the Santuario strips away the visual noise and ornamental distractions often found in ecclesiastical architecture to create a space that favors spiritual attentiveness, silence, and sacred encounter (Abel, 2011). The use of elemental materials such as stone, wood, and unfiltered natural light fosters an atmosphere of groundedness and humility. These materials speak a symbolic language—they are earthly yet elevated, familiar yet sacred—guiding the worshipper not outward toward spectacle, but inward toward contemplation and upward toward divine transcendence.

As Joseph Ratzinger (2000) affirms in *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, the beauty of sacred architecture must serve a higher spiritual purpose: not to impress, but to elevate. True sacred architecture, he writes, must lead the worshipper into the mystery of God's presence, awakening within the soul a capacity for awe, reverence, and communion. The Santuario de La Salle embodies this principle by employing spatial restraint as a method of cultivating wonder. In contrast to a culture marked by overstimulation and distraction, the Santuario offers an architecture of silence and interiority—an evangelizing space that catechizes not through words, but through the experience of sacred stillness.

B. Theological Symbolism in Structure

The Santuario's architectural elements are imbued with theological meaning, each one serving not only a liturgical function but also a catechetical purpose. Among the most striking is the use of natural light. Far from being merely a practical element, light is employed with theological intentionality. As it enters the Santuario and shifts throughout the day, it evokes the Johannine image of Christ as “the light that shines in the darkness” (John 1:5). This dynamic play of illumination reflects both the Lasallian motif of enlightenment and the biblical understanding of divine revelation breaking into human time. In this way, light becomes a living homily, forming the imagination and disposition of those who dwell within the space.

The altar, centrally positioned and stripped of ornate decoration, acts as the heart of the Santuario. Its stark presence emphasizes the centrality of the Eucharist in Catholic worship and theology, echoing *Lumen Gentium*'s affirmation of the Eucharist as "the source and summit of the Christian life" (Second Vatican Council, 1964, §11). The absence of embellishment does not diminish its importance but heightens its theological gravity—reminding the community that Christ's presence in the sacrament requires no adornment, only reverence.

Similarly, the seating and spatial layout of the Santuario reflect a profound theological anthropology and ecclesiology. The horizontal orientation, devoid of hierarchical divisions, fosters a sense of fraternity and participatory worship. This architectural decision resonates with the postconciliar vision of the Church as the People of God—a vision grounded in mutuality, dialogue, and shared mission (Second Vatican Council, 1965). It also mirrors the collaborative spirit of Lasallian pedagogy, where students and educators journey together in community toward growth, learning, and faith.

C. Lasallian Icons and the Role of Relics

Integral to the catechetical function of the Santuario is the presence of Lasallian iconography and sacred relics, which serve to root the architectural experience in the spiritual heritage of the Institute. The inclusion of a relic of St. John Baptist de La Salle, placed in a separate room, is not only devotional but pedagogical. It creates a sacramental link between the local community and their spiritual founder, presenting sainthood not as an abstract ideal, but as a tangible and historical reality. This gesture embodies the sacramental imagination central to Catholic theology—where material signs mediate spiritual truths and where history, memory, and presence converge in worship.

The Santuario also incorporates discreet yet meaningful Lasallian symbols, such as stars (representing enlightenment and divine guidance), children (symbolizing the educational mission), and books (reflecting knowledge and formation). These elements are deliberately understated, in keeping with the Santuario's minimalist ethos, yet they function as visual anchors—signposts for theological reflection and identity formation. As theologian Paul Tillich (1959) observed, symbols open pathways to the ultimate, transcending mere decoration by engaging the imagination and directing the heart toward mystery. Within the Santuario, these symbols serve as gentle but persistent reminders of the Lasallian charism: faith, zeal for service, and communion in mission. In sum, the Santuario de La Salle is not simply a venue for prayer; it is a catechetical architecture—a theology built in stone, wood, and light. It evangelizes through space, forms through silence, and teaches through the very way it is inhabited. As a sanctuary grounded in Lasallian spirituality, it extends the mission of the Founder into the realm of architecture, transforming sacred space into a living curriculum of faith.

Visual Catechesis in Practice

A. Pilgrimage and Spiritual Engagement

While the Santuario de La Salle in Biñan, Laguna is not formally recognized as a traditional site of pilgrimage, it has nonetheless emerged as a spiritual destination within the broader Lasallian

community. Educators, students, alumni, and even international visitors are increasingly drawn to the Santuario not just for liturgical celebrations, but for personal prayer, institutional rituals, and reflective moments. This organic movement toward the Santuario signifies more than mere architectural appreciation; it reveals how sacred space, when thoughtfully designed, can cultivate a pilgrimage of the heart.

The very minimalism of the Santuario, rather than diminishing its spiritual resonance, paradoxically enhances it. By consciously rejecting visual clutter and sensory overstimulation, the Santuario creates an environment conducive to interior engagement and spiritual attentiveness. The Santuario's silence speaks loudly in an age of incessant noise. In this regard, the Santuario fulfills Pope Francis' call for sacred spaces to become "oases of silence and beauty" (Francis, 2017), especially amid the distractions of a hyperconnected digital world. The Santuario becomes a pedagogical threshold, inviting visitors to slow down, dwell in the present moment, and rediscover the sacred in simplicity.

In Lasallian pedagogy, this kind of affective encounter is crucial. The movement through the Santuario's space—whether as a student pausing between classes or as a pilgrim attending a community liturgy—can itself become a formative experience, nurturing a spirituality that is contemplative, incarnational, and rooted in presence.

B. Formation Through Guided Reflection and Embodied Practice

In a sacred space like the Santuario de La Salle—defined by architectural restraint and visual simplicity—the risk lies not in what is absent, but in what might go unnoticed. Without overt iconography or verbal cues, the theological meanings embedded in the space may remain inaccessible to those unfamiliar with the Lasallian tradition or with the symbolic language of sacred architecture. To ensure that the Santuario continues to function as a space of active catechesis, the community must cultivate practices that invite reflective and embodied engagement.

Rather than relying solely on digital tools, a more incarnational approach can be rooted in guided theological reflection, experiential learning, and spiritual accompaniment. For instance, educators and formation facilitators can offer periodic architectural walkthroughs or meditative tours, helping participants to contemplate the spiritual significance of key design elements—such as the use of light, the orientation of the altar, the materials of the Santuario, and the symbolism of silence. These reflections, whether integrated into recollections, liturgical catechesis, or retreat sessions, offer a slow, dialogical unfolding of meaning—honoring the Santuario's quiet ethos while drawing attention to its richness.

Such reflection may also be embodied through ritualized movement and symbolic action within the space. Pilgrimage-style stations, seasonal processions, or liturgical rehearsals can help participants internalize the spatial catechesis. For Lasallian students especially, being led through a formative journey that links architecture with prayer, mission, and community transforms the Santuario from a passive backdrop into an active site of formation. This mirrors the Lasallian conviction that education must involve the heart and body as well as the mind.

Ultimately, this approach aligns with the Lasallian pedagogy of presence, accompaniment, and meaningful encounter. By facilitating theological reflection and spiritual attentiveness within the space itself—through intentional practice rather than technological mediation—the Santuario continues to teach in its own voice. In doing so, it affirms that catechesis, like architecture, is most effective when it is participatory, incarnational, and integrated into the rhythm of life.

C. Community as Living Catechesis

Ultimately, the power of the Santuario as a catechetical space lies not only in its architecture but in the community that inhabits it. The Santuario comes alive when it becomes the locus of shared prayer, ritual, and mission. In Lasallian institutions, the liturgies celebrated in the Santuario are often co-created by students, educators, and formation teams, making the space a dynamic expression of the living Church. This participatory approach reflects the vision articulated in *Catechesi Tradendae* (§23), which affirms that the liturgy is “the privileged place for catechesis,” where doctrine is not only proclaimed but enacted, embodied, and experienced.

In this way, the community itself becomes the primary catechist. The rituals, gestures, silences, and songs performed within the Santuario serve as a formative curriculum, teaching through rhythm, participation, and presence. Students do not merely learn about the liturgy—they are initiated into it. They proclaim the Word, compose prayers of the faithful, engage in symbolic actions, and witness Eucharistic reverence. These experiences shape not only their understanding of faith but their sense of identity and belonging within the Lasallian tradition.

Moreover, this communal formation transcends formal liturgy. The very act of gathering for prayer, recollection, or institutional rites in the same sacred space fosters a spiritual memory. The Santuario becomes a place where life’s milestones—graduations, vocational discernment—are spiritually marked. As such, it embodies the Lasallian vision of formation as a lifelong journey, not limited to the classroom but extending into every facet of institutional and personal life.

Conclusion and Future Perspectives

The Santuario de La Salle stands as a profound testament to the enduring power of sacred space as a medium for catechesis. Rooted in the spirituality of St. John Baptist de La Salle and formed by a commitment to architectural minimalism, the Santuario offers a compelling response to the needs of contemporary faith formation. In a world marked by overstimulation and distraction, the Santuario speaks through silence, simplicity, and light—becoming a visual catechism that teaches not through ornament or spectacle, but through the very experience of space.

Theologically, the Santuario embodies the Lasallian vision of formation as a holistic process, where the head, heart, and soul are engaged through both word and environment. Its architectural vocabulary—restrained yet rich, sparse yet symbolic—demonstrates that spatial simplicity need not mean theological poverty. Rather, the Santuario’s form invites deeper interior engagement, echoing the Lasallian pedagogical emphasis on presence, attentiveness, and affective learning. Through its structure, the Santuario fosters a contemplative posture, enabling both individual reflection and communal worship to flourish within a shared sacred environment.

Looking forward, several directions could deepen the catechetical and spiritual potential of the Santuario, ensuring that its influence continues to grow in both depth and reach.

One key initiative is the development of curated catechetical tours, both physical and digital. By offering guided theological reflections on the Santuario's architecture, symbols, and liturgical elements, such tours could serve as a vital educational tool—especially for students, faculty, and visiting pilgrims. Virtual tours, enhanced with multimedia elements and reflective prompts, could extend the Santuario's impact to audiences who are unable to visit in person, further affirming the global character of the Lasallian mission.

Additionally, the integration of expanded Lasallian iconography could enrich the Santuario's pedagogical landscape without compromising its minimalist aesthetic. Carefully curated student art installations, seasonal liturgical banners, or temporary visual meditations on Lasallian values—such as faith, service, and communion—could reinforce the Santuario's identity as a living space of formation. These elements would not serve as permanent fixtures, but as dynamic and contextual expressions of faith that resonate with the evolving liturgical and institutional calendar. A final and significant prospect lies in pursuing the formal recognition of the Santuario de La Salle as a national pilgrimage site in the Philippines and the broader Asia-Pacific region. Such a designation would affirm the Santuario's spiritual significance and solidify its role as a center of renewal, reflection, and unity for educators, students, and alumni. As a site that embodies the Lasallian charism in architectural form, the Santuario could offer structured pilgrimages, retreat programs, and theological symposia—becoming not only a destination for prayer, but a hub for Lasallian spirituality and dialogue.

In all these ways, the Santuario de La Salle continues to teach without speaking, forming hearts and minds through the contemplative power of space. Faithful to the charism of its patron, it echoes De La Salle's vision of educating not only through instruction but through embodied presence and intentional encounter. The Santuario's silent walls, illuminated by natural light and graced by communal prayer, invite all who enter to listen more deeply—to the Word of God, to the cry of the heart, and to the sacred stillness where divine grace quietly dwells.

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