

Micro Journal of  
**Education & Human Development**

Volume 2, Issue 1, 2008

**An Introduction to the Lasallian Philosophy of Education**

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**Abstract**

A paradigm that describes the Lasallian philosophy of education is presented, together with a discussion of the components of the paradigm. The article expounds on the Lasallian Shared Mission of providing “a human and Christian education to the young, especially the poor”. The elements of Lasallian spirituality – faith, zeal, and community – are presented from the perspective of the Founder of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, John Baptist de La Salle. The article articulates how contemporary Lasallians could embody this spirituality in daily life. Finally, the article describes the image of a teacher as culled from the writings of the Patron of Teachers, St. John Baptist de La Salle.

**Introduction**

Reflecting on St. La Salle’s philosophy of education and its relevance in the context of Philippine education, Professor Emeritus Dr. Emerita Quito (1992:135) challenged administrators and classroom teachers alike,

The University should sponsor yearly lectures on the philosophy of education of St. John Baptist de La Salle to be delivered either on May 15, feastday of St. La Salle, or on January 26, feast of the Patron of Teachers. These lectures will focus on one facet of St. La Salle’s life as a teacher, or on one aspect of his philosophy of education.

In the graduate programs offered by the Educational Leadership and Management Department of De La Salle University – Manila, the inclusion of a formal course that focuses on Lasallian pedagogy began during the third trimester of schoolyear 2001-2002. EDM535M (Lasallian Philosophy of Education) was designed as a course that will familiarize students with the life of the Patron of Teachers, St. John Baptist de La Salle, and his educational writings. In its present offering, the course aims to introduce students to the life of the Founder of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, John Baptist de La Salle, and his writings. The course also traces the beginnings of the Lasallian educational mission and the contributions of the Lasallian schools to the field of education. The Lasallian response to contemporary needs is also part of the discussion in the course.

**What is a philosophy of education?**

The chapter in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1998:231), dealing with the topic philosophy of education, provides this overview,

Philosophy of education may be considered a branch of practical philosophy, aimed ultimately at the guidance of an important aspect of human affairs. It is primarily concerned with the nature, aims, and means of education, and also with the character and structure of educational theory, and its own place in that structure.

In the first chapter of the book, *Mission statements and philosophies of education in a Philippine setting*, respected educator and linguist Br. Andrew Gonzalez, FSC (2003:7) describes a philosophy of education as “a field of specialization in educational studies in general delving into the human being as a learner and as a member of society; theories about the communication of knowledge and the

practical means of facilitating its internalization including the problem of language and medium of instruction, the goals of education". Moore (1982:6) succinctly writes, "philosophy of education focuses on the language of educational theory and practice".

Expounding on how the expression 'philosophy of education' is used, Smith (1962:638) describes what the expression means,

In pedagogical circles, the expression is used in at least four different senses. (a) It is sometimes used to refer to a *way of thinking* about educational questions. When we use it in this sense, we mean that our thinking about educational questions is like that thinking which a philosopher does. (b) It is used to refer to the *product* of philosophic ways of thinking about educational questions. (c) The expression also refers to the *logical analysis of concepts* used in educational science. When the term is used in this sense, philosophy of education may be thought of as a special case of the philosophy of science. (d) The expression is often used to refer to *courses* in which philosophy of education in any one of the senses above is studied.

**A Lasallian philosophy of education**

Lasallian scholars (Philippine Lasallian Family, 2000:27; Quito, 1992:122-123; Wright, 2000:viii,173) put forward the idea that a Lasallian educational philosophy could be constructed based on the life of St. John Baptist de La Salle, his interaction with the first Brothers, and the educational writings he has composed. This proposition is supported by Moore's assertion (1982:7) that philosophers of education are concerned with a scrutiny of what is said about education by those who practice it and by those who theorize about it.

In the Lasallian Philosophy of Education class, the paradigm that is used to unveil this educational philosophy is described by this diagram:



The paradigm presented above is consistent with the observation of Quito (1992:133) that, “if there is one outstanding characteristic in St. La Salle’s philosophy of education, it is concern for the poor”. Further, she notes that, St. La Salle’s philosophy is based on Scripture (1992:123). The interaction between the Lasallian mission and Lasallian spirituality allows the members of the Lasallian community to discover the Lasallian identity, which in turn encourages the individual to share one’s talents and gifts (*charisms*) in the context of the teaching ministry. The succeeding sections will expound on the components of this paradigm.

### **The Lasallian Shared Mission**

At the time John Baptist de La Salle started his involvement with the educational endeavor of creating schools for the ‘children of the artisans and the poor’, he realized the value of putting together a group of people who would be inspired by the same vision. The *Rule* (1987:9) of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools describes how the first schools began,

As he became aware, by God’s grace, of the human and spiritual distress of the ‘children of the artisans and the poor’, John Baptist de La Salle devoted himself to forming schoolmasters totally dedicated to teaching and to Christian education. He brought these teachers together in a community and subsequently founded with them the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

From the seventeenth century, when De La Salle established this new religious institute of laymen, up into the early part of the 20th century, the schools remained the exclusive domain of the Brothers alone. Br. George Van Grieken, FSC, described the Brothers’ stance towards secular persons working in their schools as “a ‘necessary evil’, something to be avoided if possible and to be tolerated if needed” (1999:13).

One significant event for the Catholic Church during the 20th century that had a great influence in the direction of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools was the Second Vatican Council that was held during the years 1962-1965. Brother John Johnston (1997:16) narrates that during the General Chapter of 1966, the Institute was moving towards a radical revision of the fundamental expression of itself and its mission through its *Rules*. This development received new impetus through the events of the Second Vatican Council and the documents that the Council promulgated.

Van Grieken (1999:13-14) recounts how the attitude of the Brothers towards their lay colleagues has made a turn-around during the years that followed the General Chapter of 1966. He writes,

Within this century, the Brothers’ stance changed – from the prescription in the 1925 *Rule* that ‘the Brothers of this Institute shall not have any communication with secular persons, except in cases of well recognized necessity...’ to the statement in the 1987 *Rule* that ‘the Brothers gladly associate lay persons with them in their educational mission’. From directives requiring that secular teachers in the schools not to be admitted to the Brothers’ house and that the Brothers not become too familiar with them, the Institute has come to welcome the inclusion of eighteen Lasallian lay people and two religious women as consultants during the course of the 1993 General Chapter. [The document] *A Message on Shared Mission* was generated at this same General Chapter that established the goal of moving towards the full involvement of our lay partners in the work of Lasallian education. Clearly the turn-about has been radical and deep.

The General Chapter of 1986 approved the new *Rule*, which introduced the expression - *shared mission* - and explicitly stated, that “the Brothers gladly associate lay persons with them in their educational mission. They provide, for those who so desire, the means to learn about the Founder and to live according to his spirit.” Br. John Johnston addressed the important role of lay people in the

Lasallian Mission in his pastoral letter (1998:4) as Superior General of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools,

[Lay people] take their place as 'full partners' – and we Brothers gladly associate them with us in our mission. We accept that from now on our schools will not be Brothers' schools, animated by the Brothers' community with secondary collaboration of lay teachers, parents, and students. They will be instead, 'Lasallian schools' animated by Lasallian educative communities of faith within which the apostolic activity of the Brothers' community takes place.

## Lasallian Spirituality

The term *spirituality* describes the manner by which a person lives his/her relationship with God. This includes all aspects of one's life as a Christian: attitudes, beliefs, words, and actions; prayer, worship, and sacraments; and relationship with God and with one's neighbors, self, and environment.

Br. Edward Baldwin, FSC notes that each school of spirituality seeks to focus on practices which can be most helpful in a particular lifestyle, so that the religious activities can be fully integrated with other functions of the day, such as one's work and social relations (1993:25). In the *Collection of various short treatises* by the Founder, this idea is reflected when he exhorts the Brothers to "make no distinction between your (teaching) duties and the matter of your own salvation and perfection. Be convinced that you will never achieve your salvation more surely nor acquire greater perfection than by fulfilling well the duties of your profession, provided you do so with the view of God's will." (1993:78).

An understanding of spirituality taken in the Lasallian context leads one to look at how the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of John Baptist de La Salle defined his own spirituality. The Founder's biographers (Maillefer and Bernard, 1996:31) recount how, in his *Memoirs on the beginning*, De La Salle himself provides an account of the stirrings of the Holy Spirit in his life,

God, who guides all things with wisdom and serenity and whose way it is not to force the inclinations of persons, willed to commit me entirely to the development of the schools. He did this in an imperceptible way over a long period of time, so that one commitment led to another in a way that I did not foresee in the beginning.

After that chance meeting with Adrian Nyel in 1679, John Baptist de La Salle found himself being drawn to deeper commitments and more challenging situations. De La Salle's personal experiences, which Van Grieken (1999:123) described as "the dynamic integration of foundational convictions, basic operative commitments, and consistent practices", shaped the character of what spirituality means in a Lasallian context.

In the second chapter of the 1705 *Rule*, De La Salle writes: "The spirit of this Institute is, first, a spirit of faith which should lead those who belong to it to look upon nothing except in view of God and to attribute all to God ... Secondly, the spirit of the Institute consists in an ardent zeal for the instruction of children ... bringing them up in piety and in a true Christian spirit, that is, according to the rules and maxims of the Gospel". And in chapter three of the 1705 *Rule*, the word spirit occurs again when De La Salle writes: "A true spirit of community shall always be evident and preserved in this Institute".

It might seem at first glance that we have three separate elements in the spirit being espoused by John Baptist de La Salle. However, Br. Luke Salm, FSC (1993:61) proposes that these three are simply different manifestations of the one spirit of faith,

In the thought of the Founder, faith overflows into zeal for the spread of the Gospel and is lived in a faith community. That is why both the *Declaration* of 1967 and the new *Rule* of 1987 insist on the integration of these essential constituents of the Lasallian vocation: consecration

as an expression of faith, apostolate as an expression of zeal and community life.

For contemporary Lasallians, the spirituality espoused by St. John Baptist de La Salle is highlighted in the prayers that are recited each day. As Br. Cecilio Hojilla, FSC would say, “the prayers that we say shape the lives we live; the lives that we live shape the prayers we say”. John Baptist de La Salle himself exhorts us of the value of prayer, “God has given us two sure means to keep from sin and to preserve grace, namely prayer and the sacraments.” [Meditations for Sundays and the Principal Feasts 56.3]

In the Lasallian tradition, classes begin with the prayer leader inviting the group, “Let us remember that we are in the Most Holy presence of God”. Remembering God’s presence is the means for the Christian to “tune in to God”. This awareness of the presence of God is a key element in Lasallian spirituality. Lasallians are constantly reminded to feel God’s presence their lives, in the people they encounter, and in the place that they are in. The spirit of faith allows the members of the Lasallian community to be conscious of God’s presence in their hearts.

The Lasallian prayer, “I will continue, O my God, to do all my actions for the love of you”, is a short prayer that is full of words that describe action and activity – “continue”, “do”, “actions”, and “love”. Authentic faith leads to love in action. The spirit of zeal is a whole-hearted generosity in the service of one’s fellow human beings. The spirit of zeal is described as the zest, enthusiasm, ardor, and love that one brings to the educational ministry.

The invocation, “Live Jesus in our hearts, forever!”, has its roots in the practice of the early Brothers when this phrase was used as a community signal. The Community Director would use it to tell the Brothers to proceed to the oratory, or to begin spiritual reading; the invocation was also used at the end of all community activities (Temprado, 1982:1). By taking a deeper look at this six-word invocation, one will realize the importance of the pronoun, “our”, and the plural, “hearts”. The invocation would still be grammatically correct even if the singular pronoun “my” and singular “heart” were used [Live Jesus in my heart, forever], but it would not speak of the importance that Lasallians give to the value of teamwork and community.

### **The person of the Lasallian teacher**

For John Baptist de La Salle, the vocation of a teacher is both a great gift and a great responsibility. In his educational writings, there are two sources – the *Meditations for the time of retreat* and the *Conduct of schools* – that provide material on De La Salle’s concept of the Christian educator.

The *Meditations for the time of retreat* is a compilation of sixteen meditations written during the last years of the life of the Founder. Its full French title, *Méditations pour le Temps de la Retraite à l’usage de toutes les Personnes qui s’employment à l’éducation de la jeunesse; et particulièrement pour la Retraite que font les Frères des Ecoles Chrétiennes pendant les Vacances* (Meditations for the time of retreat for the use of all persons who are engaged in the education of youth, and particularly for the retreat which the Brothers of the Christian Schools make during vacation), tells us that De La Salle did not only have the Brothers in mind when he wrote these reflections. The work, which is directed to all who are involved in the educational endeavor, describes eight different, but related, topics dealing with the work of those involved in the education of children. The first meditation in each pair takes a more theoretical approach, while the second meditation deals with the more practical aspects of the same topic.

John Baptist de La Salle speaks of the vocation of the teacher in the first pair of meditations, God in His providence has established the Christian schools, because He wants everyone to be saved. He has called you to this ministry, kindling a light in your heart, to announce His word to children. Speak simply so that every word will be clear and easy to understand. (1975:48)

Many unfortunate children suffer poverty and neglect. God's response to their situation is to establish Christian schools. These children need you to give them the Christian spirit, to teach them the practical truths of faith in Jesus Christ and the maxims of the Gospel. You must be full of zeal, so the Spirit of God can work in you. (1975:51)

The Founder makes use of the following Scriptural images – teachers as “ambassadors and ministers of Jesus Christ” (1975:54), “Good Shepherds” (1975:56), “guardian angels” (1975:60-63), “successors to the apostles” (1975:70), and “co-workers with God in His work” (1975:89) – in describing the vital task played by teachers in building God's Kingdom (1975:67-68).

In the 1706 manuscript of the *Conduct of schools* and the 1711 manuscript of the *Collection of various short treatises for the use of the Brothers of the Christian Schools*, John Baptist de La Salle enumerated twelve virtues of a good teacher – gravity (seriousness), silence, humility, prudence, wisdom, patience, reserve, gentleness, zeal, piety, vigilance, and generosity. Eighty years after de La Salle listed the twelve virtues, Brother Agathon (fifth Superior General of the Brothers of the Christian Schools) published a commentary on the twelve virtues, entitled *Les Douze Vertus d'un bon Maître*. De La Salle's listing of the twelve virtues and the work that was done by Brother Agathon is a “treasure-house” of Lasallian pedagogy, or maybe, even of universal pedagogy.

Mistades (2005:1-15) presented the reflections on the twelve virtues by students enrolled in the EDM535M (Lasallian Philosophy of Education) class. It is interesting to note that when asked, “Which of the twelve virtues of a good teacher are viewed by 21st century Lasallian educators as essential in their ministry of journeying with the young people that have been entrusted to their care?”, the response is,

[...] here are the virtues in their order of importance as perceived by the [EDM535M] class. Topping our list of virtues is humility, closely followed by patience and zeal. Vigilance, prudence, wisdom, generosity, and gentleness compose the second set; with piety, silence, reserve, and seriousness completing the list of virtues essential to educators of the 21st century. (2005:3)

## Integration

The Lasallian philosophy of education is rooted in the life journey of John Baptist de La Salle. Through God's gentle prodding, he saw the needs of young people during his time; being the faith-filled person he was, he zealously formed a community whose mission is to provide a human and Christian education to the young, especially the poor. His educational writings, intended initially for the Brothers of the Christian Schools but could be viewed as applicable to all who are involved in the educational endeavor, lifted the profession of teachers to a ministry and a vocation.

If one is to agree with Broudy (1955:617), that “educational philosophers are often motivated by a sense of social mission that impels them to devise educational schemes for reforming man and society”, then one could be led to consider John Baptist de La Salle as a philosopher of education. His thoughts and ideas are as relevant to 21st century educators as they were to 17th century teachers.

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