

Symposium on Catechesis in the Lasallian Tradition Summary Document

September 21–23, 2006

The evangelization and catechesis of the young is an “essential imperative” of Lasallian schools. More precisely, it is the true vocation of all Lasallian educators to give witness to and make known the Gospel. This is what John Baptist de La Salle, the founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, whose charism marks all Lasallian schools, intends when he says: “In carrying out your service to children, you will not fulfill your ministry adequately if you resemble Jesus Christ only in his guidance and in his conversion of souls. You must also enter into his purposes and his goals (Meditation 196.3); and when he invites us to reflect on this question: “Do you have a faith that is such that it is able to touch the hearts of your students and inspire them with the Christian spirit? This is the greatest miracle you could perform and the one that God asks of you, for this is the purpose of your work” (Meditation 139.3).

In this light, representatives of a range of educational ministries from each of the United States districts gathered to take part in a La-

sallian Symposium on Catechesis in September 2006. The primary goal of the symposium, which was sponsored by the Brothers Visitor of the United States and Saint Mary’s Press, was to articulate a contemporary Lasallian vision of Catholic catechesis and evangelization of the young in the United States today.

We who took part in the symposium desired to unearth, unpack, and break open and discuss the distinguishing and essential elements of effective catechesis and evangelization of the young through the wisdom of the Lasallian charism entrusted to the Institute of the Christian Brothers for the service of the Church. We set forth the following “essential” and “imperative” characteristics of the Christian education of Lasallian schools and the Christian educator. We invite deep reflection on these characteristics among Lasallian educators with hope that an understanding of our true vocation might be deepened, our fidelity to that understanding renewed, and our integrity preserved for the sake of the young entrusted to our care.

Essential Characteristics of the Christian Education of Lasallian Schools

1. The Lasallian school—the entirety of its academic, spiritual, pastoral, athletic, and communal life—is the proper environment for the Christian education of the young.

Although religion teachers help students explore the meaning and significance of Christian faith, Christian education is not confined to the religion classroom. All Lasallian educators, Brothers, and lay colleagues alike are evangelizers

and catechists by their vocation of giving witness to the Gospel in ways that invite young people into a deeper, more integrated, more committed faith. Lasallian schools provide young people with formation in the Catholic worldview and an apprenticeship in Christian living. Gospel values are to be embodied throughout the school, and religious reflection is to be integrated with all subjects across the curriculum.

Personal thoughts _____

2. Christian education in Lasallian schools is an encounter with a God who is always present—God who is present in the world, not removed from the world; God who unites, not separates.

Remembering that we are in the presence of God is, in one respect, an outcome of Christian education—we remember that God is present with us always, in every situation, in every experience, in every relationship, in every culture. This is an especially imperative point in our

age of technology. In the rapid pace of society, especially in communication, the transmittal of information, and the expansive availability of entertainment through technological means, we are faced with the challenge of helping young people learn how to simply be in God's presence. We must seek new understanding and ways in which to utilize technology for the sake of the Christian message, which is ultimately about the primacy of meaningful relationships.

Personal thoughts _____

“It is by helping the young people we teach to see their experience, their humanity, their daily lives in the light of Christ’s incarnation that we witness to the living truth of the Gospel, that we help to uncover in their lives the holy presence of God.”

— Kevin Reagan

“When we forget [that we are in the presence of God], our ministry loses an important element. When we forget, our ministry becomes mere human labor.”

— Greg Kopra

“Do we have competent educators who have both the pedagogical expertise and the theological knowledge to adapt the message to the needs of the folks being served? Do we have vehicles of bringing adults and young people into a context where there can be a credible witness to the tradition?”

— Jeffrey Gros, FSC

3. Hiring for excellence and fidelity to mission is a critical responsibility of Lasallian schools.

The young entrusted to our care, especially the poor, deserve excellence in education. It is not sufficient for teachers to be competent in their specific academic field or for coaches to be accomplished and knowledgeable in their particular extracurricular activity. The Lasallian educator must be committed to the values and mission of the Church and of the Institute, and to the Lasallian school as

a community that gives witness to and embodies Gospel values. Although the teachers of religion in the school may have a unique role or opportunity in the evangelization and catechesis of the young, the entire Lasallian educational community assists the young to interiorize and make normative Gospel values in their lives, to become more and more conscious of God calling them to help “fashion a world according to God’s design.”

Personal thoughts _____

“All of our students will live in a pluralistic world, no matter how homogeneous our school or parish.”

— Jeffrey Gros, FSC

4. The Lasallian school is rich in cultural, religious diversity and pluralism and so is a welcome environment for interreligious dialogue and the advancement of ecumenism.

The Lasallian school body itself often reflects society’s cultural and religious di-

versity and pluralism. This demands an appropriate interreligious dialogue and literacy within the Lasallian school. The Lasallian school also must foster ecumenical Christian unity in and through formation in Catholic identity.

Personal thoughts _____

5. The Christian education of the Lasallian school is communal and holistic.

Lasallian spirituality is innately inclusive. That is, we recognize, seek, and find God in community—together and by association. A Lasallian education is one that illuminates a young person’s ex-

periences with the light of the Gospel. Knowledge of faith cannot be separated or compartmentalized from the whole of life. As well, catechesis is an education and formation in a living faith that is most effectively undertaken through the proclamation of the Gospel, service, community, worship, and prayer.

Personal thoughts

6. Christian service, especially the service of the poor, is a normative dimension of Lasallian education.

Service may first be undertaken by the young as an outcome of catechetical method, but as a catechetical method, we know that service, when undertaken with selflessness, is a profound entry

point for the young to recognize and be attracted to the Gospel at work in the world. Christian service invites young people to walk through a transformative doorway that leads to awareness of their true vocation as Christians—to love and serve others. God does not call us to an impossible task.

Personal thoughts

“De La Salle’s spirituality is an apostolic spirituality—a spirituality that finds God present in the world, not removed from the world. It is a spirituality that draws us to faithful involvement in the world.”

— Greg Kopra

“The personal encounter with Christ is developed and cultivated when young people reflect on the Gospel and understand that the Gospel is active in the world today through their engagement in their community through service and social justice.”

— Michael Sanderl, FSC

Essential Characteristics of the Lasallian Educator

1. The Lasallian educator is open to, in fact welcomes, the transformative love of God that acts through and within the student-teacher relationship.

The teacher in the Lasallian school

must be truly present, first and foremost, to the needs of the student and, in so doing, give witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ. In such a relationship, both student and teacher are transformed.

Personal thoughts

“To accompany one’s students one must be virtuous and tender. The relationship between teacher and student, therefore, needs to be reciprocal.”

— Frederick Mueller, FSC

“To be a catechist by vocation is to love and respect our young people as distinct persons. It is to accept them ‘as they are’ and to take them seriously. It is to walk side by side with them, permitting them to share openly their perplexities and questions about the meaning of life and about religious faith.”

— John Johnston, FSC, “The Challenge: Live Today Our Founding Story”

“The Catechism of the Catholic Church says this about catechesis, ‘At the heart of the catechesis we find, in essence, a Person, the Person of Jesus of Nazareth, the only Son of the Father . . . who suffered and died for us, and who now after rising, is living with us forever ’” (CCC, 426).

— Kevin Reagan

“The contribution of the Lasallian charism and mission to Catholic catechesis and evangelization is the intersection that occurs between faith and action; where the Gospel and service find expression and meaning in complementary relationship.”

— Michael Sanderl, FSC

2. The Lasallian educator, especially in the religious education classroom, must give faithful witness to the Gospel and the teaching of the Church.

The young are most transformed in the catechetical process through the teacher’s authentic love and genuine respect for them—perhaps this can be con-

sidered the greatest pedagogical practice in the Lasallian school. The competent catechist knows too that the interiorization of faith happens over a lifetime—not within the scope and sequence of “a course of study”—thereby acknowledging that they are but one teacher along the way.

Personal thoughts

3. The Lasallian educator knows that at the heart of catechesis is personhood—the lived encounter of the relationship between the person of the student and the person of Christ Jesus.

The aim of catechesis is always to help young people see the world and interpret their experience, throughout life, through the eyes of faith in Christ. This is what Lasallians mean when we speak of “enlivening minds, touching hearts.”

Personal thoughts

4. The Lasallian educator recognizes and respects the reciprocity of relationship between human experience and the proclamation of the Gospel.

Catechesis is an apprenticeship in interpreting experience in the light of the Gospel. The young cannot articu-

late their faith without linking it to their lived experiences. That is to say, the young person’s experience of being loved opens their heart to the Word (which is Love); this openness leads to hearing the word proclaimed in ever deeper ways so that experience is reinterpreted in the light of the Catholic Christian tradition.

Personal thoughts

5. The Lasallian educator masters the art of facilitating the young people’s important questions of faith.

How does a person mature if not by asking over and over throughout life critical questions, such as “Who am I?” and “What should I do with my life?” The effective catechist is one who creates “space” within the catechetical session for the young people to articulate their questions, for their questions present the

opportunities for them to gain inklings of “who” they are. One of the most important methods a catechist can employ is the art of constructing questions that engage young people in conversations of profound religious meaning. This means too that the catechist must be able to accept that young people will ask questions of faith that are beyond the human capacity to answer.

Personal thoughts _____

6. The Lasallian educator uses methodologies that help young people come to a deeper understanding of the content of faith.

Method and content are necessarily

related in so far as catechesis is a dynamic interaction between receiving the word proclaimed and interiorizing Christian knowledge through apprenticeship in Christian living.

Personal thoughts _____

“As Lasallian educators remain faithful to the process, they do not need answers to every question; rather, their role is to help students think for themselves. It is less a question of expertise and more a dynamic of feeling comfortable enough to raise the issues in a civil manner and to encourage open discussion. Proper catechesis is never a matter of brainwashing; it is always a matter of dealing sensitively with the ‘big questions’ of young people as they take responsibility for shaping their own lives.”

— Robert Berger, FSC

“Lasallian spirituality stresses that it is mainly in the relationship to students and colleagues that the presence and love of God manifested in Jesus Christ is to shine through words and actions.”

— Gerard Rummery, FSC

"We need to see the touching of the hearts and minds of each individual in each class as building the groundwork for the future of the Church."

—Jeffrey Gros, FSC

7. The Lasallian educator welcomes and respects the diversity of students that are entrusted to them.

The religion classroom, in particular, cannot be presumed to be a place where faith speaks to faith. Some of the young people before us are believers, others find themselves struggling with their faith and are disconnected from the Church,

some come from faith traditions other than Christian, and yet others have not heard the Gospel proclaimed. The catechist must welcome and respect all by acknowledging, accepting, and seeing the world of each of these students so that the proper conversation can be constructed for their salvation.

Personal thoughts

"De La Salle valued creating an environment wherein students are willing to speak."

—Charles Legendre

8. The Lasallian educator engages young people in dialogue as a constitutive dimension of evangelization and catechesis.

Evangelization and catechesis are not monologues; rather, they happen in a di-

alogue that affirms the great insights of the young as faithful contributors to the conversation. The catechist must shun any exercise that keeps the student in a passive role.

Personal thoughts

9. The Lasallian educator uses language that is accessible to the young people they serve.

How can the catechist capture the imagination of the young if not in using language they can access and that has meaning in their culture and experience? We know all too well that words can be used as a knife or as a spoon. The one cuts apart, divides, and separates; the other feeds and nourishes. The language of faith must always be at the service of catechesis, rather than catechesis being at the service of figuring out an inaccessible language.

The Lasallian catechist strives to achieve a balance between the use of a common language of faith, which can serve to unify the Church, and language adapted to young people. From the founding of the Institute, catechism has been taught in the vernacular—so that the student can surely understand. We must ask ourselves perpetually, “what is the ‘vernacular’ of the day” in the education and formation of the young. Our language must be accessible in the context of their lives and their cultures, but accessibility is not simplicity—we must be cautious not to oversimplify.

“Words have power; they can heal and inspire, or they can alienate and bewilder.”

—Julie Michels

Personal thoughts

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Participants

Br. Armand Alcazar,
Christian Brothers of the Midwest,
Burr Ridge, IL
*How Do Lasallians Address the
Religious Needs of Youth?*

Br. Robert Berger,
Manhattan College, Bronx, NY
*The Gifts of Enthusiasm and Fidelity in
a Technological World*

Laurie Delgatto, Saint Mary’s Press

Br. Jeffrey Gros, Memphis
Theological Seminary, Memphis, TN
*The Challenge of the Lasallian
Catechist Today*

Maura Thompson Hagarty,
Saint Mary’s Press

Lorraine Kilmartin,
Saint Mary’s Press

Greg Kopra, De La Salle Institute,
Napa, CA
*Remembering the Holy Presence
of God, Reflections on the Foundation
of Lasallian Education*

Charles Legendre,
Saint Paul’s School, Covington, LA
A Move Toward Identity

Steven McGlaun, Saint Mary’s Press

Julie Michels, Totino-Grace
High School, Fridley, MN
The Language of Faith

Br. Frederick Mueller,
La Salle Academy, Providence, RI
*Lasallian Religious Education: Teacher
as Mediator of the Truth*

Christine Schmertz Navarro,
Saint Mary’s Press

Kevin Regan, La Salle Academy,
Providence, RI
*The Experience of the Student
in Teaching Religion*

Br. Michael Sanderl, Saint Mary’s
College of California, Moraga, CA
*Service: A Point of Entry and
Departure with the Lasallian Mission
for Young People*

John Vitek, Saint Mary’s Press
*Current Tensions in the Review of
High School Texts by the Ad Hoc
Committee to Oversee the Use of the
Catechism: A Lasallian Perspective*

Symposium papers are available
at this link: www.cbconf.org