

Lasallian Religious Education: Teacher as Mediator of the Truth

God is so good that, having created us, he wills that all of us come to the knowledge of the truth. This truth is God himself and what he has desired to reveal to us....This is why God wills all people to be instructed, so that their minds be enlightened by the light of truth....We cannot be instructed in the mysteries of our holy religion unless we have the good fortune to hear about them, and we cannot have this advantage unless someone preaches the word of God....This is what God does by diffusing the fragrance of his teaching throughout the whole world by human ministers....Since, then, God in his mercy has given you such a ministry, do not falsify his word but gain glory before him by unveiling his truth to those whom you are charged to instruct. Let this be your whole effort in the instructions you give them, looking upon yourselves as the ministers of God and the dispensers of his mysteries.¹

If you want the instructions you give those whom you have to instruct to be effective in drawing them to the practice of good, you must practice these truths yourselves, and you must be full of zeal...that your zeal draw upon you the Spirit of God to animate your students in the same way.²

By reason of your state you are responsible for the instruction of children....You must consider the obligation you have to win their hearts as one of the principal means to lead them to live in a Christian manner....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....The more tenderness you have for the members of Jesus Christ and of the Church who are entrusted to you, the more God will produce in them the wonderful effects of his grace.³

Role models: American religions can provide youth with adult and peer group role models, providing examples of life practices shaped by religious moral orders that constructively influence the lives of youth, and offering positive relationships that youth may be invested in preserving through their own normatively approved living.⁴

Adults should be aware, however, that better adult teaching of youth will require stronger adult relationships with youth. More important in the effective religious teaching of teens than, say, new pedagogical techniques will be the building of sustained, meaningful, personal adult relationships with the

¹ John Baptist de La Salle, *Meditations* (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications of Christian Brothers Conference, 1994), Meditation 193.1, pp. 432-433.

² *Ibid.*, Meditation 194.3, p. 436.

³ *Ibid.*, Meditations 115.3, p. 213; 139.3, p. 257; 134.2, p. 247.

⁴ Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 243.

teens they teach. This will require investments of time, attention, and readiness to be open and vulnerable with teens.⁵

For Lasallians the process of religious education involves in a key and significant way the person of the teacher. For young people to come to knowledge of the truth, truth that is God, it is necessary that someone preach the Word of God. That teaching is more than simply words; it is an instruction grounded in practice—the teacher as a role model—and focused on the relationship between teacher and student—a relationship of winning and touching hearts, a relationship of tenderness and care. The recent study of the religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers comes to the same conclusion: key to the faith development of young persons is the adult who serves as role model and who invests in significant relationships with the young. This paper will explore, from the Lasallian perspective, the appropriate role of the teacher in the instruction in the faith and faith development of young persons. After a brief overview of foundational Lasallian principles, this paper will examine some Lasallian metaphors about the Lasallian teacher, explore one metaphor more thoroughly, and offer some implications and conclusions resulting from this perspective.

Jean Pungier⁶ has noted that John Baptist de La Salle was concerned about the whole person of the student and thus viewed religious instruction in a context broader than knowledge of the catechism. His was a pastoral perspective whereby religious instruction joined to general education aimed to produce the truly Christian person, a true follower of Christ, whose whole life was to be centered on the development of a spiritual life open to the Spirit of Jesus Christ and his teachings. Thus, De La Salle offered a holistic approach to faith development: his *Duties of a Christian to God* outlining appropriate religious knowledge and tying it to morality,

⁵ Ibid., p. 267.

⁶ Jean Pungier, *John Baptist de La Salle: The Message of His Catechism* (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications of Christian Brothers Conference, 1999), pp. 15-46.

religious practice, and prayer; his *Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility* outlining the appropriate practices needed everyday to make that religious knowledge real and tangible; his *Conduct of the Christian Schools* setting practices that move from Christian knowledge to apprenticeship for Christian living; and, his *Meditations* providing the framework for the early teachers to effect this holistic pastoral plan for young persons.

This holistic perspective stems from De La Salle's anthropology that was both unified and Christian. For him the interaction of soul and body in each individual reflected the destiny of human nature for the Beatific Vision. This resulted in his emphasis on the strong coherence between sacred and secular, a basis for his pedagogy. Thus, for De La Salle the teacher is called to teach, counsel and direct; however, the teacher must as well be an exemplar whose behavior must be that of a Christian. The interaction between teachers and students needs to be characterized by a spirit of faith that unified the sacred and the secular, by a spirit of zeal that manifested itself in relationships with students, and by a spirit of community that bound the teachers to each other and caused them to think of their classes as intimate communities in which responsibility is shared with the students.⁷

Sauvage and Campos⁸ have noted that for De La Salle there was to be no teaching of catechism unconnected with the school and no school that did not include the teaching of catechism. This attitude arose from the unity that he saw both in ministry and in the very person of the Brother or the early teacher—a unity arising from a dialectical tension that appeared to be opposed (God and the world, humanization and evangelization, action and contemplation, prayer and work, incarnation and transcendence). In the words of Sauvage and Campos: “We have seen

⁷ Yves Poutet, *The Origins and Characteristics of Lasallian Pedagogy* (Manila, Philippines: The De La Salle University Press, Inc., 1997), p. 87.

⁸ Michel Sauvage and Miguel Campos, *Announcing the Gospel to the Poor: The Spiritual Experience and Spiritual Teaching of St. John Baptist de La Salle* (Romeoville, IL: Christian Brothers National Office, 1981), pp. 81-82.

that for De La Salle the explicit announcement of the Gospel through the proclamation of God's word, liturgical education, and moral formation sheds light on an experience of 'salvation' which the children of the poor have now had. Their hopeless lives have been transformed by the concrete presence of their teachers who are for them the sacraments of God's saving love. The announcement of the Gospel then opens the children to the dynamic fullness of the 'mystery' that has taken real form in their experience; the announcement helps them to interpret and experience in a wholly new way their existence in the world....Such, we believe, is the deeper meaning of De La Salle's emphasis on the 'practical' character of the religious instruction the Brother [early teacher] gives and of all his activities as teacher and educator."

Therefore, the Lasallian teacher, a key player in the faith development, religious instruction, and the coming to appropriation of the fullness of the "mystery" for the young [what we shall from now on refer to as "Lasallian religious education"], can be seen as a mediator between God and the young, open to a faithful encounter with God **and** with the young in their own world, constantly present to God **and** to the young, announcing the presence and salvation of God to the young by word and witness, making God's gratuitous love known to the young through the gift of his own life.⁹ The Lasallian teacher can also be seen as an instrument of God, a minister of God, who above all is faithful to God and to the word of God in his life and in his daily practices, who is competent in the faith with a thorough knowledge of Scripture and doctrine, and who possesses spiritual competence, i.e. contact with the living God through prayer and a moral life, in order to help others to penetrate the mystery of God's loving salvation in the world.¹⁰

⁹ Ibid., pp. 82-83.

¹⁰ Michel Sauvage, *Catechesis and the Laity* (Brisbane, Australia: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1991), pp. 225-230 of the Supplement, Chapter IV: The Brother, "Minister of the Word of God."

The Lasallian vision of the teacher is a rich and encompassing vision. Besides the key metaphors of mediator and minister, De La Salle used other metaphors in his attempt to establish the indispensable role that the teacher plays in the salvation of the young entrusted to his care. The teacher is the laborer in the field who helps the farmer (God) nurture and bring to full growth the young plants (the students); the teacher is the administrator of the precious treasure of faith that is to be dispensed to the students; the teacher is a sacrament re-presenting Jesus Christ; the teacher is the angel precursor sent by God to prepare the hearts of the students and the Guardian Angel who reveals the truths to his students, directs them in the path of goodness, and protects them from the dangers that threaten them. Likewise, the teacher is the architect of God who helps God construct the body of Christ in and through his students; the teacher is prophet both chosen and sent to announce truth and to denounce sin; the teacher is a miracle-worker who can proclaim and denounce through extraordinary signs—the touching of hearts; the teacher is an apostle and a bishop in his participation in the ministry of the Church; the teacher is a father and a mother in bringing his students to new life in the faith done with the firmness and vigilance of a father and the tenderness and care of a mother; the teacher is a guardian who adopts the young, especially those who are morally destitute and spiritually orphans.¹¹

Still another metaphor for the Lasallian teacher is that of the Good Shepherd¹², a metaphor that is played out in detail in Meditation 33 and that can be examined as a template for the role of the teacher in Lasallian religious education. In the Gospel of John, the verse before the passage on the Good Shepherd that De La Salle reflects on in Meditation 33 is: “I have come

¹¹ Edgard Hengemulle, “The Christian Teacher,” *Lasallian Themes [2]* (Rome, Italy: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1995), pp. 26-34.

¹² De La Salle, *Meditations*, Meditation 33, pp. 91-92 ; Jean Louis Schneider, “Instruction,” *Lasallian Themes [3]* (Rome, Italy: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1997), pp.173-184; Leon Lauraire, “A School that is Relational,” *Conduct of Schools: An Overall Plan of Human and Christian Education, MEL Bulletin 12* (Rome, Italy: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2004), pp. 19-26.

so that they may have life and have it to the full.”¹³ This is the rationale for Lasallian ministry: to bring young people to life in all its fullness, to bring young people to salvation (wholeness), to bring to young people the good news that all are called to be loved, to be respected as God’s children. This is not simply a vision for the future; in the Lasallian dialectic fullness of life is now and for eternity, salvation is wholeness now and forever, the good news is both now and for the future. Thus, the parable of the Good Shepherd is predicated on this mission of bringing life and salvation to all; and, therefore, the Lasallian teacher has the same mission in Lasallian religious education.

Meditation 33.1 establishes that the shepherd has great care for his sheep and a quality that is needed for this to happen is that he knows each one of them individually. As a result of this personalized knowledge the teacher is able to discern what is needed as regards each student: mildness, firmness, patience, stimulation, correction, vigilance. The teacher needs to seek this gift of discernment of character through prayer—it is beyond the simply empirical and scientific. Thus, the educational relationship with young people has its foundation in the teacher’s love for the students, gentleness toward them, constant vigilance, and affective nearness. The approach is clearly a human and affective approach, an approach of the heart.

The 2nd point of the Meditation establishes that the sheep must know their shepherd in order to follow him and two qualities are needed by those who lead others, by good teachers: a high level of virtue so to serve as an excellent guide and role model, and great tenderness for those entrusted to their care. To accompany one’s students one must be virtuous and tender. The relationship between teacher and student, therefore, needs to be reciprocal. The teacher needs to be close and transparent to the students; the teacher needs to make an effort to be with the students so that the students can see the real person and not simply the professional teacher.

¹³ John 10:10, quoted from *The Jerusalem Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966).

Lauraire ¹⁴ has noted: “Young people have more need of witnesses than of teachers...Sociological research and analysis make it possible to confirm the decisive influence of witness and identification—two essential factors of the educational process....It is the strength of witness which gives moral authority, authority which comes much more from the quality of the personality than from the force of regulations.” The tenderness required of the teacher allows students to identify with, relate to, and trust the teacher. The affectionate relationship, constant attention to young people, sensitivity regarding their concerns, understanding of their particular world with its language, attitudes, interests, values, expectations, needs and difficulties allow the teacher to be an effective guide, a trusted leader, and a true mediator of knowledge, particularly the “good news” of being saved.

The 3rd point of the Meditation establishes that the sheep must hear the voice of their shepherd. This requires that the teacher is understandable to the students: the teacher needs to make himself heard and the teacher must speak with authority. Therefore, the teacher needs to use language that is understandable by young people; to develop methods suited to their age and development; to listen to them, reach out to them, and accompany them in a process of on-going dialogue that insures that both teacher and students understand each other; to make use of personalized teaching techniques; and, to offer them instruction that is tailored and adapted to their needs. The teacher must bring to the class an explicit proclamation of Jesus Christ, one that is founded upon a deep personal knowledge and competence [see Sauvage above], a witness to the Gospel in one’s person, and an inventiveness in translating the Gospel into the present day reality of the students’ lives. For the teacher to speak with authority he needs to have established a personal credibility that flows from an authentic and life-giving relationship of teacher to students. However, the teacher must as well be demanding of and challenging to his students: to

¹⁴ Lauraire, pp. 22-23.

make them aware of their own limitations, needs, and defects, as well as their talents, abilities, and qualities. The voice of the teacher must be a voice both of tenderness and of firmness, of affirmation and of correction. To do this a wholesome environment of healthy relationships is needed in the classroom.

Thus, the Lasallian teacher must be discerning and guiding, virtuous and tender, understandable and possessing moral authority. The process of Lasallian religious education is, therefore, relational, personalized, dialogic, and, adaptive to needs. It is based on the power of witness, the efficacy of affective relationship, and the indispensable role of the teacher as guide and mediator—leading young persons to the truth who is God.

If Lasallian religious education is predicated on the mediating role of the teacher, a role that might best be captured by the relational metaphor of brother[sister]¹⁵, then some implications and conclusions would follow:

1. the selection of appropriate persons to serve as religious education teacher is paramount
 - a. competence in the faith
 - b. competence of knowledge (doctrine and Scripture)
 - c. spiritual competence
 - d. personal qualities that would allow them to serve as witness and role model
 - e. openness to young persons;
2. the initial and on-going formation and professional development of religious education teachers must be substantial, sequential, and appropriate;

¹⁵ Jean Pungier, *If We Were to Re-Write "How to Run Christian Schools" Today?...* (Rome, Italy: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1980), pp. 54-64; Schneider, pp. 180-181.

3. the efficacy of the instruction must be seen in terms broader than notional knowledge; it must be seen and measured as well in practice, in integration into one's life, in moral behavior, and in other non-cognitive ways;
4. the quality of the instruction must be viewed through the lens of the relational and transformational, e.g. the teacher's ability to engage the students in ways that allow them to appropriate knowledge, to be engaged in exploring the "mysteries," and to come to some personal faith commitment; a classroom environment that allows students to explore and to grow;
5. a recognition that the ultimate measure of success will come "on the day of judgment...because the lessons you [the teacher] have given them [your students] and the profit they have made from them will be unveiled before the whole world...Oh! what joy a Brother of the Christian Schools will have when he sees a great number of his students in possession of eternal happiness, for which they are indebted to him by the grace of Jesus Christ!"¹⁶

For the Lasallian, teaching is more than simply words. Teaching, as mediated through the person of the teacher, is a privileged way of leading young persons to the knowledge of the truth, who is God, to the lived experience of being loved by that God, and to a fullness of life lived in the presence of that God.

¹⁶ De La Salle, *Meditations*, Meditation 208, pp. 470-472.