

*Remembering
the
Holy Presence
of God*

*Reflections
on the
Foundation of Lasallian Education*

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**Wherever I go I will find you, my God;
There is no place
That is not honored by your presence.**

JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE
from *The Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*, p. 59 – adapted

Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God. The remembrance of the presence of God has been at the foundation of the Lasallian educational mission from the very beginning of the Institute. Saint John Baptist de La Salle reflected a growing spirituality in 17th century France when he most vividly recognized God’s call to him in the needs of the poor and working class youth of Rheims. He made it a focal point of the religious and pedagogical formation of the early Brothers. And they made it a focal point of what eventually came to be a system of education that we call today *Lasallian education*. The remembrance of the presence of God provides a unique lens through which Lasallian educators approach their vocation of teaching. It also provides a unique outcome for Lasallian education in general and religious education in particular. In the end, we want our students to leave our schools capable of approaching the world and their participation in it from a graced perspective – knowing that God is present in every encounter, calling them to *be* God’s presence in their relationships with others, especially recognizing God’s presence and invitation in those most in need in our world.

The purpose of this paper is to explore this foundational element – the spiritual underpinning, if you will – of the Lasallian Educational Mission. It is this foundation, understood well, that guided John Baptist de La Salle and the first Brothers as they developed the Christian Schools and it can serve as our guide as well for ongoing conversations about curriculum, teacher training, classroom management, and the like.

I. The Beginnings of Lasallian Education: the Faith Journey of Saint La Salle.

The journey of our Founder sheds light on the importance of the remembrance of the presence of God in our educational efforts. John Baptist de La Salle was a person of tremendous faith throughout his life, wanting more than anything to do the will of God as best he could discern that will. Over a period of several years, a series of seemingly haphazard events drew De La Salle into a life direction that he admits he had not at all anticipated at the time of his ordination. As he reflected prayerfully on these events, he came to see a pattern – a purpose – an agenda of sorts – that he recognized as God’s gentle yet persistent presence. This awareness only came to him in retrospect – as he was able to look back over many years of experience. This is critical, for he himself admits that if God had shown him the outcome at the beginning, he would have never taken on the challenge.

As he says in the *Memoir of the Beginnings*,

Indeed, if I had ever thought that the care I was taking of the schoolmasters out of pure charity would ever have made it my duty to live with them, I would have dropped the whole project.... It was undoubtedly for this reason that God, who guides all things with wisdom and serenity, whose way it is not to force the inclinations of persons, willed to commit me entirely to the development of the schools. God did this in an imperceptible way and over a long period of time, so that one commitment led to another in a way that I did not foresee in the beginning.¹

In particular, he realized in faith that God had been making Himself known to De La Salle increasingly in the faces and the needs of young boys from poor and working-class families. The will of God, De La Salle came to see over time, was to provide an education for these boys that would both prepare them for gainful employment in the community and prepare them to lead mature Christian lives of dignity and faithful service.

¹ Blain, Jean-Baptiste. *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle, Founder of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools*. Ed. Luke Salm, FSC. Trans. Richard Arnandez, FSC. Landover, MD: Christian Brothers Publications, 2000. 80.

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. It is a spirituality that characterizes God as wise and gentle, determined and persistent. God is not one to “force the inclinations of persons,” but one who is determined to be heard and responded to. It is a spirituality that is inclusive of all, recognizing that God wants all to be saved. It is a spirituality, finally, that is made manifest in community. De La Salle did not found a *teacher*; rather, he founded a *community of teachers* – a community called to be God's presence for the young people entrusted to their care through their example and through their teaching.

Through his meditations, letters, and other writings, De La Salle speaks often to the early Brothers – and over the centuries to us today – of the call to remember the holy presence of God and to let this remembrance affect how they – and we – deal with people. For example, in his Meditation for the feast of Epiphany, he exhorts the Brothers: “Recognize Jesus beneath the poor rags of the children whom you have to instruct. Adore him in them.”² In a letter to a young Brother, De La Salle reminds him that “the remembrance of God's presence will be a great advantage in helping you and in inspiring you to do all your actions well.”³ In the Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility, students are taught to treat each other respectfully and thoughtfully because God is present in the encounter, not merely in response to some cultural expectation:

“Children should do these things out of respect for God in whose presence they are. When teaching children and training them to observe the practices of decorum that refer to their neighbor, teachers should urge them to show

² De La Salle, John Baptist. Meditations. Eds. Augustine Loes, FSC and Francis Huether, FSC. Trans. Richard Arnandez, FSC and Augustine Loes, FSC. Landover, MD: Christian Brothers Conference, 1994. 179.

³ De La Salle, John Baptist. Letters. Ed. Augustine Loes, FSC. Trans. Colman Molloy, FSC. Romeoville, IL: Lasallian Publications, 1988. 20.

others those signs of consideration, honor, and respect appropriate to members of Jesus Christ and living temples of God, enlivened by the Holy Spirit.”⁴

Throughout the school day, students and teachers stopped periodically to recall God’s presence. *Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God.* Powerful words, indeed – powerful words that lead to powerful actions.

II. The Remembrance of God’s Presence Today: Implications for Religious Education.

A. The Threefold Purpose of Catholic Education. In *To Teach as Jesus Did: A Pastoral Message on Catholic Education*, the American bishops comment that “the educational mission of the Church is an integrated ministry embracing three interlocking dimensions: the **message** revealed by God (didache) which the Church proclaims; **fellowship** in the life of the Holy Spirit (koinonia); **service** to the Christian community and the entire human community.”⁵ Regarding Catholic schools and their role in addressing this mission, they say:

“Of the educational programs available to the Catholic community, Catholic schools afford the fullest and best opportunity to realize the threefold purpose of Christian education among children and young people.... A school has a greater claim on the time and loyalty of the student and his family.... It provides a more favorable pedagogical and psychological environment for teaching Christian faith.”⁶

John Baptist de La Salle and the first Brothers understood this dynamic. This is why religious instruction took place in the school, not in the local parish church. It is also why religious instruction took place as part of the school day and as part of the larger

⁴ De La Salle, John Baptist. *The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility*. Ed. Gregory Wright, FSC. Trans. Richard Arnandez, FSC. Landover, MD: Christian Brothers Conference, 1990. 4.

⁵ National Conference of Catholic Bishops. “To Teach as Jesus Did: A Pastoral Message on Catholic Education.” *The Catechetical Documents: A Parish Resource*. Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 1996. 89.

⁶ *Ibid.* 106.

educational program that aimed to touch the head, heart, and soul of each student. The thrust of the religious “instruction” was threefold: the teaching of the religious truths necessary for salvation; the ethical practices that put flesh to the religious truths; the building of a community wherein everyone belonged (regardless of socioeconomic status, academic differences, etc.) and everyone helped each other get along.

The same thrust of religious education holds true in Lasallian schools today. The threefold purpose of Christian education – message, fellowship, and service – provides three doorways through which the students entrusted to our care can encounter the holy presence of God – and all three doorways are equally important. Religious and doctrinal knowledge is highly valued and taken very seriously in Lasallian schools. If young people do not receive a strong, challenging academic education in the faith, where else will they receive it? However, this knowledge is not knowledge for its own sake; rather, it is knowledge that only makes sense when integrated into the fabric of one’s life. Thus, religious education in Lasallian schools takes the knowledge and seeks to assist students into putting it into action in their lives, especially in the way they treat one another (thus strengthening the community) and how they reach out in service to those most in need in the broader community.

B. The Holy Presence of God Who Calls. The God we remember is the God who has brought us all together and who is present within and among us at all times. The Holy Presence lends toward the development of a welcoming, inclusive community of faith where all are welcome, all are loved as children of God, and all work together to strengthen the community. The Holy Presence calls us, as it called De La Salle, the first Brothers, and the first students, to be especially sensitive to those most in need within the community

and in the broader community. De La Salle expresses this beautifully in his Second Meditation for the Time of Retreat, when he describes the terrible situation of poor and working class families whose children are essentially left to wander in the streets without any reliable guidance or supervision. He doesn't paint the bleak picture and then simply ask the Brothers to pray for these families. Rather, he tells his Brothers that "God has had the goodness to remedy so great a misfortune" by providing these youth with teachers who are with them all day long, teaching them reading, writing, and their religion. He goes on in the meditation to encourage the Brothers to thank God for calling them to so important a ministry.⁷ It is important to note here that the call comes not only to classroom teachers, but to all who are members of the educational community – administrators, support staff, parents – and students! Let *us* remember that *we* are in the holy presence of God. In fact, the example set by how the community of educators loves and supports one another often has a more powerful and lasting impact on the students than the example of any individual teacher, staff, or administrator.

C. The Holy Presence of God Reveals the Full Understanding of the Human Person. By imbuing our students with a regular, active awareness of the holy presence of God in all of life, we offer them a deeper understanding of the human person. As the Congregation for Catholic Education notes in *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School*, "The religious dimension makes a true understanding of the human person possible. A human being has a dignity and a greatness exceeding that of all other creatures; a work of God that has been elevated to the super-natural order as a child of God, and therefore having both a divine origin and an eternal destiny which transcends this

⁷ De La Salle, John Baptist. *Meditations*. Eds. Augustine Loes, FSC and Francis Huether, FSC. Trans. Richard Arnandez, FSC and Augustine Loes, FSC. Landover, MD: Christian Brothers Conference, 1994. 435.

physical universe.”⁸ With such an emphasis on recognizing God’s presence every day in every person – especially as manifested by the example of the teachers, staff, and administrators in the school – young people begin to treat one another differently, more reverently. Moreover, they begin to see themselves differently. We work hard to help students embrace the reality that they are created in the image and likeness of God, imbued with incredible dignity and potential. This is the Holy Presence!

D. The Holy Presence of God Who is Loving and Abiding. The Religious

Dimension of Education in a Catholic School continues:

The educational value of Christian anthropology is obvious. Here is where students discover the true value of the human person: loved by God, with a mission upon earth and a destiny that is immortal. As a result, they learn the virtues of self-respect and self-love, and of love for others – a love that is universal. In addition, each student will develop a willingness to embrace life, and also his or her own unique vocation, as a fulfillment of God’s will.⁹

I am reminded of De La Salle’s experience of the presence of God in his own life, of God’s way with him – a way that is gentle yet persistent, patient yet unrelenting, working little by little, step by step, one commitment leading to another. As ambassadors of Jesus Christ, as persons called to *be* the Presence of God for those entrusted to our care, we are called to work in the same way – patiently and persistently, honoring where a young person is in her/his life journey while at the same time stretching her/him to more fully realize her/his potential. The holy presence of God is not a sledgehammer – rather, it is more like the “tiny whispering sound” that the prophet Elijah encounters on Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19: 8-13). The holy presence of God is more like Jesus as described in the Book of

⁸ Congregation for Catholic Education. “The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School: Guidelines for Reflection and Renewal.” *The Catechetical Documents: A Parish Resource*. Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 1996. 507.

⁹ *Ibid.* 513.

Revelation: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, [then] I will enter his house and dine with him, and he with me.” (Revelation 3: 20). De La Salle was so open to responding to God’s call to service, even though the call was pulling him in unexpected directions, because he trusted, as Jesus did, that God would not abandon him; on the contrary, the God who calls is also the God who sustains and supports. As De La Salle notes in his First Meditation for the Time of Retreat, God does not truly desire something without assisting persons in the accomplishment of God’s desire:

“God wills not only that all come to the knowledge of truth, but also that all be saved. He cannot truly desire this without providing the means for it and, therefore, without giving children the teachers who will assist them in the fulfillment of his plan. This, says Saint Paul, *is the field that God cultivates, the building that he is raising*, and you are the ones whom he has chosen *to help in this work by announcing* to these children the Gospel of his Son and the truths that are contained in it.”¹⁰

Lasallian educators pass on this trust in God’s goodness and abiding presence to the students entrusted to their care through their example as well as through their lessons. And the outcome of this lesson well-learned is a willingness on the part of young people to take risks for the sake of loving and serving others, knowing that the God who calls them to this love and service is the same God who is with them every step of the journey.

E. The Holy Presence of God Who Transcends Religion. What about the students in our schools who are not Catholic? As noted above, remembrance of the presence of God informs our actions. Recall again De La Salle’s experience of God who “is not one to force the inclinations of persons”? One manifestation of this throughout Lasallian history is the manner in which we work with persons who are not Catholic: we

¹⁰ De La Salle, John Baptist. *Meditations*. Eds. Augustine Loes, FSC and Francis Huether, FSC. Trans. Richard Arnandez, FSC and Augustine Loes, FSC. Landover, MD: Christian Brothers Conference, 1994. 433.

work in a way that “proposes” the faith but does not “impose” it. Our example – the way we live our lives in the educational service of the young, especially of those most in need – is in fact a powerful “proposition.” The religious studies courses we teach are powerful propositions of our Catholic faith. But, respecting the many and varied ways in which God is manifest in the world, we do not impose our particular religion on the young. This is entirely consistent with Church teaching, as articulated in *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School*:

Not all students in Catholic schools are members of the Catholic Church; not all are Christians. There are, in fact, countries in which the vast majority of students are not Catholics – a reality which the [Second Vatican] Council called attention to. The religious freedom and the personal conscience of individual students must be respected, and this freedom is explicitly recognized by the Church. On the other hand, a Catholic school cannot relinquish its own freedom to proclaim the Gospel and to offer a formation based on the values to be found in a Christian education; this is its right and duty. To proclaim or to offer is not to impose, however; the latter suggests a moral violence which is strictly forbidden, both by the Gospel and by Church law.¹¹

The National Directory of Catechesis reinforces this way of being the Holy Presence for those who are not Catholic, particularly in the Church’s efforts to provide a human and Christian education to those who are economically poor but who are not necessarily Catholic:

In many dioceses throughout the United States, Catholic schools have been beacons of hope for those who are poor in the goods of this world.... Many of these children and their families are not Catholic, but the Church is determined to serve the human and social needs of the poor and to provide them a distinctively Catholic education, which includes a thorough and faithful catechesis. Many of these Catholic schools are genuine centers of evangelization that effectively proclaim the Gospel to those who have never

¹¹Congregation for Catholic Education. “The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School: Guidelines for Reflection and Renewal.” *The Catechetical Documents: A Parish Resource*. Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 1996. 494.

heard it before as well as to those who have heard it but have not been moved by it to transform their lives.¹²

III. Some Concluding Remarks

Let us remember. . . We repeat these words often throughout our days in Lasallian ministries. Why so often? Because we tend to forget. In the midst of our daily responsibilities, joys, sorrows, successes, and struggles, we tend to forget the One who has called us to this ministry. When we forget, our ministry loses an important element. When we forget, our ministry becomes mere human labor. When we forget, it becomes all about us and what we can do to effect change. When we forget, things become more daunting and less possible.

However, when we remember that we are in the holy presence of God, we are empowered by the God who calls us, who urges us, who doesn't call us to impossible tasks. When we remember, our work takes on dignity and potential. When we remember, we reach out in courage and faith to cooperate in God's work of salvation. As Jesus told his disciples after his encounter with the rich young man, when they questioned the possibility of anyone being saved, "for mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God, all things are possible." (Mark 10: 27)

**Earth's crammed with heaven,
And ever common bush afire with God;
But only those who see take off their shoes....**

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING, *Aurora Leigh* (1857), Book VII, line 820

¹² United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. The National Directory for Catechesis. Washington, DC: USCCB, 2005. 263.