

A Move Toward Identity

The investigation of the roots of the Institute has shone light on our present Lasallian ministries. The work of Lasallian scholars in the last sixty years has provided access to a picture of Saint La Salle, of the early communities, and of the practice and methodologies employed in the schools of the founding communities that has given us guidance and has also called us to task. Like the movement of Vatican II which sought to reconnect the Church to spirit and life of the nascent Christian communities, our recent Lasallian scholarship reveals a foundation story which challenges us today to name the core of our mission and to capture that mission in authentically Lasallian practices. One event recorded by early Lasallian historians and reflected upon by our current scholars may shed light on the catechetical landscape today.

When Fr. Baudrand, the powerful pastor of Saint Sulpice Parish, pressured Fr. De La Salle to change the brothers' habit from the course, often-derided garb to a more aesthetically pleasing and ecclesiastical look, De La Salle refused. Commenting on this controversy, Luke Salm, F.S.C., notes that De La Salle viewed Fr. Baudrand's request both as a threat to the fledgling community's autonomy as well as its identity (63). The historian Blain writes that De La Salle feared that "the change in the exterior would affect the interior at the expense of the 'new man' in a habit that appealed to worldly people." (184-5).

The story of the habit provides a fitting paradigm for the Institute today. De La Salle carefully reflected upon the relationship between the habit and the mission of the community of brothers. Like De La Salle, we are carefully reflecting today upon the constitutive elements of our mission and association to that mission. Fr. Baudrand wanted the Brothers to look like other religious of his day. Forms of association to the Lasallian mission have emerged which do not fit into canonical categories. Despite what must have been a tremendous internal struggle, Saint La Salle, the man who specified in

his will to his community “to have entire submission to the Church,” refused the pastor’s request to change the habit (Salm, 185). As we move to name and nurture the constitutive elements of the Lasallian mission today, we can expect, if the story holds its paradigmatic nature, that holding our ground on issues of Lasallian identity will lead us into conflict with the Church. Like Saint La Salle, we will move in the tension of faithfulness to our beloved Church and faithfulness to the charism of our Institute.

Saint La Salle viewed the school as a means of salvation. In his work on the “Double Contemplation,” Brother Jeffrey Calligan, F.S.C., explains that De La Salle viewed salvation both as the improvement of the student’s state in this life as well as concern for his eternal salvation (Buttimer 2006). Brother Gerard Rummery, F.S.C., further commented that, if Saint La Salle were concerned about salvation only in the sense of eternal life, our Founder would have established an order of catechists (Buttimer 2006). Yet Saint La Salle would not allow a student to attend his schools without attending the catechism lesson. From the first, the catechism lesson held a privileged place among the day’s lessons in the founding schools. Further, the Brothers taught the catechism lesson differently from any other lesson of the day. The Brothers employed a different methodology entirely and even a different set of classroom rules. The catechism lesson in the Brothers’ school was dialogical, a sacred, privileged conversation. Dialogical catechesis is our Lasallian heritage.

The Dialogical Nature of Catechetics in Lasallian Schools

A consistent element of catechetics in Lasallian schools has been the structured yet personal dialogues between the teacher and students. In order to illustrate the nature and consistency of this dialogue, I will explore the nature of Lasallian catechetics through an examination of the following milestones:

- *The Conduct of the Christian Schools.*
- *The Catechist's Manual.*
- *Living with Christ.*
- *Jesus of History, Christ of Faith.*

The Conduct of the Christian Schools

De La Salle assembled the collected wisdom of the first brothers in 1706 in the work entitled *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*. The highly practical work begins with instructions on how to enter a school building rather than with educational theory or spiritual advice. Silence predominates the workings of the classroom described by the *Conduct*. Teachers use gestures and “the signal” to move students from task to task. After morning prayers, the teacher would not speak again until the reflection at the end of the morning session and before Mass. In the reflection, a practice characterized by Brother Gerard Rummery as “heart speaking to heart,” the Brother would share a personal reflection on one of the great truths of the faith.

The catechism lesson at the end of the day differs entirely from the rest of the lessons of the day. The Brothers and students would break silence and engage in a conversation. Concerning the nature of the conversation, Saint La Salle notes the following: “ Teachers will not speak to the students during catechism as though they were preaching, but will ask the students questions and sub-questions almost continually. (106). De La Salle instructs the brothers to craft questions which students will be able to answer in complete sentences rather than single words or short phrases. The *Conduct* also reflects De La Salle’s awareness as to the developmental needs of his students as well as the complexity of the content of the catechism lesson. De La Salle urges that “a special effort will be made to question, much more often than others, those whose minds are slow and dull and who have difficulty remembering.” (107). The methods described in the *Conduct* promote a lively engagement of all students in the class.

De La Salle further indicates the importance of promoting dialogue in the catechism lesson by insisting that the Brother refrain from reprimands during the catechism lesson. De La Salle directs the Brother to “take care not to rebuff or confuse students, to encourage and even help them when they are having difficulty in recalling, and to offer rewards...sometimes even to the more ignorant who have made the greatest effort to learn well.” (109). De La Salle valued creating an environment wherein students are willing to speak.

The Catechist's Manual

The Brothers of the Christian Schools published *The Catechist's Manual* in 1902 when Brother Gabriel Marie served as Superior General. The work was translated into English in 1912 and became a widely used guide for Catechetical instruction. In a brief published to accompany the Manual, Pope Pius X wrote, “It does not suffice to possess ample and profound religious doctrine, whether dogmatic or moral; but as in the case of all other sciences and with greater reason, so here it is indispensable that to knowledge of doctrine the master should join clearness and certainty of method, if he would set forth the subject in such a way as to penetrate the minds of the young and remain deeply engraved therein.” He later states, “We desire that it (*The Catechist's Manual*) be in the hands of every priest who is called to teach catechism to children.” (O, would that Pope Benedict say something similar about a Saint Mary's Press publication!)

The Catechist's Manual reflects a continuity with the approaches described in *The Conduct of Christian Schools*. The Manual emphasizes the creation of a climate in the catechism lesson that will be inviting and encouraging, describes the function of the teacher as one who will facilitate the engagement of students in the lesson, calls the catechist to be sensitive to the developmental needs of the student, and greatly develops the art of constructing questions. The catechist is instructed to shun any exercise which would keep the student in a “purely passive attitude.” (55). In order to engage the students, the teacher “should not speak for a long time continuously, but

should intersperse his explanations with many questions.” (59). The authors see the student’s basic mode of thinking as “essentially discursive” and, therefore, devote a large portion of the manual to the discussion of various types of questions which will keep students engaged in the lesson (63).

In *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*, Saint La Salle instructed the Brothers to construct questions and sub-questions to give direction to the Catechism lesson. In the *Catechist’s Manual*, the authors bring the science of questioning to the catechism lesson. The methods described in the Manual reflect a sophisticated understanding of the learning needs of the students and the dynamics of critical thinking. The authors of the *Catechist’s Manual* bring the best tools of philosophy and logic available in their time to bear on De La Salle’s instruction to dialogue with students in the Catechism lesson.

Living with Christ

Many motivations drove the Catechetical Reform movement of the 1940’s and 50’s, but a major impetus was the sense that the religious instruction of the day did not connect with the faithful. *The Baltimore Catechism* had been commissioned by the American bishops during their Third Plenary Conference in 1884, a work which contains 499 questions in 38 lessons in 3 parts. The Baltimore Catechism provided the content of the Catechism lesson; memorization of questions and answers served as the primary mode of instruction. Commenting in an article entitled “The Teaching of the Catechism in Lasallian History,” Brother Jose Navorro, F.S.C. commented, “It (the Baltimore Catechism) was a traditional manual, scholastic and clear in style, designed to discourage any sort of theological discussion...it was a dry and arid text, boring, focused exclusively on doctrinal elements with little evidence of the Word of God and liturgy and distant from the real life of the children being catechized.” (20).

In response to the crisis in catechesis, the Brothers of the District of Saint Louis created the Catechetical Commission which sought to offer an alternative to the prevailing methods of catechesis of the day. The *Living with Christ* series, published from 1943 until 1957, resulted from the work of that Catechetical Commission. The textbooks employed the methodology of “ongoing discourse” (Navarro, 22) Although the textbooks include material to be memorized, the end of each lesson concludes with questions for reflection and discussion.

Despite the impression that the *Living with Christ* series provided an avant-garde approach, if looked upon within the practice of catechetics in the Lasallian tradition, *Living with Christ* marks a return to the fundamental dynamic which has marked our Catechism lesson since the founding schools – meaningful dialogue.

Jesus of History, Christ of Faith

The last work that I would like to highlight is one with which I have had personal experience. *Jesus of History, Christ of Faith*, written by Tom Zanzig and first published in 1992 by Saint Mary’ Press, makes available the best of Catholic Biblical scholarship to 9th and 10th graders. For many of my students, this text opened the world of interpretation theory for the first time. In *Jesus of History, Christ of Faith*, Tom Zanzig created for young people an approach necessary for more than a literal reading of Scripture. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, “In order to discover *the sacred authors’ intention*, the reader must take into account the conditions of their time and culture, the literary genres in use at that time, and the modes of feeling, speaking and narrating then current.” (110) Zanzig meets the challenge of providing a way for young people to do just what the Catechism calls for – an exploration into the “sacred authors’ intentions” through an examination of the historical and cultural milieu. Zanzig helped my students encounter Scripture with a new set of ears and eyes. Given the tools of contextual interpretation, my students heard Scripture passages in ways that they never had before. Zanzig’s approach to

teaching students how to have a conversation with Scripture is, itself, dialogical. Throughout *Jesus of History, Christ of Faith*, Zanzig asks questions which focus on the implications of the meanings in Scripture uncovered through a contextual approach. For instance, in a section exploring the problem of legalism in Jewish society, Zanzig asks the students to consider the following question: "Do Christians have the same tendency toward legalism that Jews during Jesus' time had?" (139). The text spurs substantive conversations which require a student to have a command of a solid reading of Scripture as well as allow for an infusion of the student's point of view.

Jesus of History, Christ of Faith follows in the line of great catechetical material produced by Saint Mary's Press and is, in my humble opinion, one of the great religion textbooks available for use in the high school classroom. The sadness is, however, that this text is no longer available for use in the high school classroom. Even after several revisions guided by the U.S. Bishops', the Catechism Committee has deemed this text not to be in conformity with *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*. And so a great Lasallian resource sits on the shelf, and a skilled writer who understands the effectiveness of a dialogical approach to catechetics is sidelined.

Leadership

In recent times, Brothers Superior have directed the Brothers and Lay Colleagues to remain faithful to the Lasallian heritage of dialogical Catechesis. In February of 1962, in the ferment of the catechetical reform movement, Brother Nicet Joseph, then Superior General, published a Circular entitled *The Catechetical Mission of the Brothers of the Christian Schools*. The circular examines the place of catechesis in the mission of the Institute and the aims and approaches involved in effective catechesis. Brother Nicet describes catechesis as the "education of a living faith." Brother Nicet writes, "Above and beyond the understanding and memory, the heart and depths of the soul must be reached: in short, what must be achieved is the education of a living faith in those we teach." (54). Although the circular does endorse particular methods, the

work describes larger issues such as the spiritual life of the catechist, the training of the catechist, the aims of Catholic schools, the relationship between the catechist and student, the relationship between the Catechism lesson and the other secular subjects and the theology of salvation. What emerges from the circular is a picture of catechesis that is well-grounded in Church doctrine, supported by current pedagogical technique, and, above all, personal. Brother Nicet calls upon catechists to design lessons which connect with each student's life. "The good teacher keeps in mind the facts referred to at the start and gets the class to join in; and above all he and they do this from the standpoint of contemplative faith and not of mere explanation, with all that implies of the necessity of an intimate and personal response....The catechism lesson therefore does not consist in explaining the textbook, nor in starting with definitions and catechism answers, but with the real life of God's people." (109) Brother Nicet describes a catechesis which demands that the teacher be in touch with the world of the student through open, effective lines of communication. In the pastoral letter *The Challenge: Live Today our Founding Story*, (January 1, 2000), Brother John Johnston expands on Brother Nicet's vision of effective catechesis: "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. To be a catechist by vocation is to share with young people what we see, think, and believe, without trying to impose faith on them." (72). Brother Alvaro's Pastoral Letter of December, 2004, includes the following description of the dialogical and empowering nature of Christian education: "Christian education... has an extremely important role to play in our current reality, provided that it is understood integrally as a type of education that is human and personal and which plays a critical role that makes possible the creation of a new society...an education that is participatory and fraternal...an education that makes students take charge of not only their own development, but also the development of their own community...and which allows them to interiorize and make Gospel values their norm for life." (43-44).

A constitutive element of our Lasallian identity is dialogical catechesis. From Saint John Baptist de la Salle until Brother Alvaro, Superiors General have called for a type of catechesis designed to “touch hearts” through example and dialogue. An examination of the catechetical works produced by the Lasallian world reveals an unbroken emphasis on meaningful dialogue with students. The contribution of effective catechesis from the Lasallian world to the Church may well be in danger now. The struggles of Saint Mary’s Press signal not only a rejection of textbooks but a rejection of a dialogical approach to catechesis that is the Lasallian hallmark. Holding on to our Lasallian catechetical heritage may well be the “habit issue” of our day.

Works Cited

- Blain, Jean-Baptist. *The Life of John Baptist de La Salle, Founder of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, Book Two*. Translated by Richard Arnandez, Edited by Luke Salm. Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 2000.
- Brothers of the Christian Schools. *The Catechist's Manual*. Translated by John Joseph McVey. Philadelphia, PA: 1912.
- Brothers of the Christian Schools. *Living With Christ, High School Religion Course I*. Winona, MN: Saint Mary's College Press, 1946.
- Calligan, Jeffrey. "De La Salle: The Founding Story." Buttimer Institute. July, 2006.
- Echeverria, Alvaro Rodriguez. "Associated With the God of the Kingdom and the Kingdom of God: Ministers and Servants of the Word." Pastoral Letter to the Brothers. Rome, 2004.
- Johnston, John. "The challenge: Live Today our Founding Story." Pastoral Letter to the Brothers. Rome, 2000.
- Joseph, Nicet. "The Catechetical Mission of the Brothers of the Christian Schools." Pastoral Letter to the Brothers, Rome, 1962.
- La Salle, John Baptist de. *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*. Translated by F. de la Fontainerie and Richard Arnandez, and edited by William Mann. Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1996.
- Navarro, Jose Maria Perez. "The Teaching of the Catechism in Lasallian History." MEL Bulletin #17, 2001.
- Rummery, Gerard. "Lasallian Resources." Buttimer Institute. July, 2006.
- Salm, Luke. *The Work is Yours: The Life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle*. Landover, MD: Christian Brothers Publications, 1989.
- Zanzig, Thomas. *Jesus of History, Christ of Faith* (3rd Edition). Winona, MN: St. Mary's Press, 1999.