

**Service:  
A Point of Entry and Departure with the Lasallian Mission for Young People**

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Since the founding of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools in 1680, the life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle (1651-1719) and expressions of the Lasallian Heritage have inspired many individuals to participate in the Lasallian Mission and led to the expansion of Lasallian Education to 82 countries. In their own unique ways, and by providing “a human and Christian education to the young, especially the poor” (*Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools*, ¶ 3), each of the 11 Regions of the Institute are responding to local educational needs. Examples in the United States/Toronto Region, specifically, include the San Miguel Schools, Cristo Rey High Schools, the partnership between the San Miguel Schools of Chicago and the Chicago Public School System, and the Lasallian Educational Opportunities (LEO) Center in Oakland, California. These newer apostolates, combined with intentional efforts of making existing, traditional educational works increasingly more accessible to students from lower economic backgrounds, give contemporary expression to the Lasallian Mission in our local contexts. These educational efforts and innovations, combined with Lasallian formation programs such as the Buttimer Institute of Lasallian Studies, Lasallian Leadership Institute, Lasallian Social Justice Institute, Huether Lasallian Conference, allow Lasallians to engage the life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle in ways that lead to their own participation in the Lasallian Heritage and engage them in the Lasallian Mission in viable and vital ways.

For many young people at the secondary and tertiary level in the United States, the experience of service is the point of entry into the Lasallian Mission where the life De La Salle is explored, the depth of the Heritage and Spirituality is more deeply understood, and the

international scope of the Lasallian Mission is realized. Others have found themselves part of the Lasallian Heritage or Spirituality, or have learned about De La Salle, and service is, for them, an expression and point of departure in their participation with the Lasallian Mission. With regard to a Lasallian vision of Catholic catechesis and evangelization of young people in the United States today, the approach with young people and their response to this catechesis and evangelization are informed by, and find expression in, meaningful experiences of service. At the heart of the Lasallian Mission (*Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools*, ¶ 6) and the Catholic Church (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, ¶ 75, ¶ 124-127, ¶ 1229) is the Gospel. The Gospel can inform, therefore, the young person's experience of service and engagement with the Lasallian Mission.

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 a complementary relationship. When service is a point of entry and/or departure for a young person's experience and expression of the Lasallian Mission, and when that Mission is rooted in the Gospel, then our Lasallian Charism contributes to the Church's catechetical role with young people. Specifically, the *Meditations* of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, relevant selections of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and the contemporary messages to young people in the Church and in our Lasallian context, are three lenses through which service is examined as points of entry and departure with the Lasallian Mission. This, then, illustrates the contribution of the Lasallian Charism and Mission to Catholic catechesis and evangelization with young people in the United States through the intersection of the Gospel and experiences of service.

Whether the term “Lasallian” is framed in the context of Heritage, Mission, or Spirituality, unpacking and defining the term “Lasallian” is imperative to the clarity of its expression and shared understanding. Aware that the Lasallian Mission is international in scope, the expression of this Mission reflects local realities, customs, and contexts with regard to Lasallian Education. While various frameworks, explanations, or foundational statements can be crafted to explain, “what it means to be Lasallian,” a common framework and place from which we understand the contemporary expression of the Mission is the life of John Baptist de La Salle. Students have often asked me, “What does it mean to be Lasallian?” I have responded by identifying that the term “Lasallian” goes beyond a part of speech; rather, the root of this word is the person of John Baptist de La Salle. In the context of service, the life, the writings, and the wisdom of De La Salle have often framed an experience of service as “Lasallian” and helped young people to grasp that their service and growing commitment to social justice are in relationship to the Lasallian Mission through the example of De La Salle.

For young people, De La Salle’s life captures the movement of the Spirit in his life as an active response to the Gospel and deep reliance on the Providence of God. The writings of De La Salle provide further inspiration for young people in the experiences of service and living the Gospel, as well as lenses for reflecting upon those experiences. I have been grateful to witness profound moments with young people when experiences of service have been synthesized with reflections on the life or writings of De La Salle and the Gospel message. Service has been, for them, the point of entry in more fully realizing the Gospel, Lasallian Mission, or life of De La Salle, as well as the point of departure in their giving expression to the Gospel, the Lasallian Mission, or example of De La Salle through their own lives.

In presenting and reflecting upon the life of De La Salle with young people, I have utilized brief biographical sketches, my own presentations summarizing his life, or various biographies (Salm, *The Work is Yours*; Van Grieken, *Touching the Hearts of Students*). In addition to these resources, the utilization of De La Salle's original writings has been helpful in a young person's ability to understand and reflect upon their service as "Lasallian." Specifically, the use of the *Meditations* provides insight into the life of De La Salle and inspiration in the life of a young person in the areas of faith, community, and service. When selections from these *Meditations* are combined with passages from Scripture, such as Matthew 25, The Beatitudes, and relevant parables, opportunities for meaningful reflection, discussion, and prayer emerges.

De La Salle's *Meditation for the Feast of Saint Francis* provides direction to young people for the ways in which they encounter poverty in their experiences of service to others. De La Salle wrote, "You are required by your work to love the poor, since the task you have in this work is to devote yourself to their instruction. Look upon them with Saint Francis as images of Jesus Christ, and as those who are best to receive his Spirit in abundance. In this way the more affection you show for them, the more you will belong to Jesus Christ" (*Meditation for the Feast of Saint Francis*, ¶ 173.1). Whether they are tutoring a fifth grader, serving lunch in a soup kitchen, or participating in a Habitat for Humanity building project, two important messages from De La Salle are transmitted to young people. First, service of the poor is relational and rooted in love. This opens the opportunity for young people to look beyond their experience of service as a "task" to be done *for* others and to be open to it as a "relationship" to be shared *with* another. It moves them from, "How was serving lunch to those people at the soup kitchen today?" to, "Who did you meet today and how did you love them?" In this latter question, the action becomes the expression of an inner disposition – love. This love can be realized in

reflecting upon service and it might move that young person to a deeper love of “the poor” in the future. The second message from De La Salle in this *Meditation* is that one’s self is given to another in service. In this exchange one becomes closer to Jesus Christ. It is here that the young person potentially understands their actions as modeled after Christ’s and in the expression of service comes into closer relationship with Christ.

When working with high school students from Sacred Heart Cathedral Preparatory in San Francisco, California, participants in Lasallian Youth gathered after school four days a week and sponsored four different service projects. The van outreach was one of the projects that drew larger numbers of the students. We gathered to make bagged meals and then, with a van full of students, we would drive to different parts of the city where there were larger concentrations of people who were homeless or poor. We would pull over, get out of the van, and then offer the bagged meals to those whom we met. “Good afternoon. Are you hungry? We have some lunches.” Oftentimes, it was the exchange of a glance, a comment of gratitude, or a brief conversation that yielded deeper meaning and fuller understanding for these young people. De La Salle wrote, “Recognize Jesus beneath the poor rags of the children whom you have to instruct. Adore him in them. Love poverty and honor the poor after the example of the Magi, for poverty should be dear to you who are responsible for the instruction of the poor” (*Meditation for the Feast of the Adoration of the Kings*, ¶ 96.3). Afterwards, we gathered at school to discuss, reflect, and pray about the experience, and students would frequently refer to “the homeless” they met by name, and talk less and less about the meals they offered. They were able to move beyond the smells, sights, or preconceived ideas about poverty or homelessness and wrestle with the stories they heard, reflect upon the gaze they observed, and pray by name for an individual they met. Not only were they able, over time, to move beyond the externals of

homelessness and poverty, they were awakened to the dwelling of Christ in this experience of service, in themselves, or in “the other” they met.

The balance and complementary nature of a life of faith, service, and community that is often expressed and experienced in the Lasallian context for young people speaks to them in a very concrete way. De La Salle compared one’s own faith to the sea when he wrote, “It is difficult to realize how much good a detached person is able to do in the Church. The reason is that detachment shows a deep faith; when a person abandons himself to the Providence of God it is like a man who puts himself out on the high seas without either sails or oars” (*Meditation for the Feast of Saint Barnabas*, ¶ 134.1). The call by Jesus to, “Come, follow me” (Matthew 19:21; Mark 10:21), is given a Lasallian context in this *Meditation* by De La Salle. In small, incremental steps, opportunities to serve others open for a young person a growing willingness to trust God and grow in faith. Responding to the call to serve can be challenging, risky, or even unnerving for young people and this *Meditation* by De La Salle does address their openness to place themselves at the service of others and in relationship with them.

Relationships with others in the context of service are three-fold. First, it is a deepening relationship with another whom I do not know. Service has the potential to move us beyond an experience of “service to” another to an experience of “service of” or “service with” another. Second, service contains the relationship with Christ and openness to the presence of God. Where is God in this experience, and how am I closer to Christ through my actions? Third, the relationship to others with whom we are in community is significant for young people. De La Salle wrote, “Union in a community is a precious gem, which is why Our Lord so often recommended it to his apostles before he died. If we lose this, we lose everything. Preserve it with care, therefore, if you want your community to survive” (*Meditation for December 30*,

¶ 91.2). Community provides a necessary and supportive context for service, and service provides an expression and strengthening of community for young people. With proper preparation, prayer, and discussion, service can become Gospel service and community can become a Gospel community.

The Lasallian Mission and Charism contributes to Catholic catechesis in the United States through meaningful opportunities for young people to be engaged in service. De La Salle wrote, “Since you are ambassadors and ministers of Jesus Christ in the work that you do, you must act as representing Jesus Christ himself. He wants your disciples to see him in you and receive your instructions as if he were giving them to them” (*Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, ¶ 3.2). Experiences of service can be expressions of the Gospel with young people, and they themselves can potentially see their actions and their whole life as responses to the Gospel message and example of Christ. At the heart of the Gospel is the person of Jesus Christ, and this heart is shared with the Lasallian Mission giving expression to the Gospel through the ministry of education. In this education young people have the opportunity given to them to see their lives in relation to the Gospel message and person of Jesus Christ.

The intersection of the Lasallian Heritage and Mission with the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is a significant one in the lived expression of faith, service, and the Gospel. The *Catechism* states, “Catechesis is an *education in the faith* of children, young people and adults which includes especially the teaching of Christian doctrine imparted, generally speaking, in an organic and systematic way, with a view to initiating the hearers into the fullness of Christian life” (¶ 2.5). The Church’s pastoral mission provides the framework and foundation for catechesis, including “the initial proclamation of the Gospel or missionary preaching to arouse faith; examination of the reasons for belief; experience of Christian living; celebration of the

sacraments; integration into the ecclesial community; and apostolic and missionary witness”(¶ 2.6). Experiences of service can lead young people to a fuller understanding of the message revealed in the Gospel of the person of Jesus Christ and contribute to the Church’s role of catechesis. To catechize is "to reveal in the Person of Christ the whole of God's eternal design reaching fulfillment in that Person. It is to seek to understand the meaning of Christ's actions and words and of the signs worked by him." (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, ¶ 426). Service leads young people to a deeper understanding of the Gospel message, a personal encounter with Christ, and can contribute to the fuller experience of the pastoral mission of the Church in the life of a young person.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) addressed the important intersection of service, the Gospel, and personal relationship and encounter with Christ, “It is in the name of this God and of His Son, Jesus, that we exhort you to open your hearts to the dimensions of the world, to heed the appeal of your brothers, to place your youthful energies at their service” (*Message of the Second Vatican Council to Youth*). 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. In recent years, the gathering of the world’s youth and young people in major cities around the world at World Youth Days have provided the invitation to live the Gospel in experiences of service as expressions of the Gospel message.

The World Youth Days provided a context for Pope John Paul II to link the lives of young people with the life of Jesus Christ through their relationship with him. In his address to the youth of the world on the occasion of World Youth Day 2000, Pope John Paul II (1999) stated, “Young people of every continent, do not be afraid to be the saints of the new



millennium! Be contemplative, love prayer; be coherent with your faith and generous in the service of your brothers and sisters, be active members of the Church and builders of peace” (“Message of the Holy Father to the Youth of the World on the Occasion of the 15th World Youth Day,” ¶ 3). If participation in our Lasallian Mission is rooted in the Gospel, and is also given contemporary expression in experiences of service, then our Lasallian educational endeavors and institutions contribute to the response of young people to this invitation. John Paul II (2001) reiterated this message in preparation for World Youth Day 2002, when he exhorted, “Let the Gospel be the measure and guide of life’s decisions and plans! Then you will be missionaries in all that you do and say, and wherever you work and live you will be signs of God’s love, credible witnesses to the loving presence of Jesus Christ” (“Message of the Holy Father to the Youth of the World on the Occasion of the 17th World Youth Day,” ¶ 3). Accordingly, service is intimately and explicitly rooted in one’s relationship with Christ. This not only serves as the potential lived reality for young people and the message of Pope John Paul II to the youth of the world, it is also the invitation to young Lasallians to more fully live the Gospel and be expressions of the Lasallian Mission.

In the similar way that Pope John Paul II invited and encouraged young people to live their lives as an expression of their deep relationship with Christ, Brother Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría, FSC, Superior General, acknowledges that the lives of young Lasallians give authentic witness to our educational Mission and their relationship with Christ. Brother Álvaro (2001) wrote, “Young Lasallians, you have become a part of this movement through your membership in a group which is characterized by a life of faith, a commitment to service, and the search for community. These are three dimensions which are essential in the life of a Christian, and which also characterize Lasallians, the heirs and disciples of St John Baptist de La Salle,

who served God and poor children in his particular way” (“Letter to Young Lasallians”).

Brother Alvaro (2003) offers a Lasallian context to the message that John Paul II spoke to young people when we wrote:

We have to see the poor with the eyes of the God of Jesus, the Father of life, and hear their cry. We know that the mission of the Son of God in history, a mission of compassionate solidarity, emerged from God's contemplation of the world. Our challenge is to be compassionate as our heavenly Father is compassionate. This is a compassionate solidarity through which we allow ourselves to be affected by the sufferings of others, acting against avoidable sufferings and assuming the task of finding solutions that bring hope and transformation. (“Message to Young Lasallians”)

As young people learn about our Founder, Saint John Baptist de La Salle, understand our Lasallian Heritage, and participate in our Lasallian Mission, they also participate in lives of service, joined with faith and community. Service is the point of entry or departure with the Lasallian Mission, as well as a possible deepening of their life of faith rooted in the Gospel and formed by a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Experiences of service are the point of entry to a young person’s own understanding of the Lasallian Mission, as well as a meaningful form of expressing their participation in this Mission. Service can also lead young people to a better understanding of and witness to the Gospel message, and a relationship with Jesus Christ. If this is what authentic, meaningful experiences of service in the Lasallian context can offer and contribute to a young person, then these same experiences of service can be the contribution of the Lasallian Mission and Charism to Catholic catechesis in the United States. The shared foundation of the Gospel leads young people to participate in and understand the Lasallian Mission, as well as gives expression to this Mission. In the Lasallian educational setting students’ participation in service provide opportunities to link these lived experiences of service to the Gospel and can facilitate a deepening relationship with Jesus Christ. Service as a point of entry and departure can lead to

being at the service of the Lasallian Mission, Catholic catechesis, expression of the Gospel, and a deepening relationship with Christ for young people.