

THE TEACHER AS MINISTER OF GRACE

Not too long ago whenever we spoke of “vocation”, we almost always had in mind the Priesthood or the religious life. Happily today we more and more realize that everyone has a vocation, a special, personal call from God to perform a life’s work for God according to the talents with which God has endowed each individual person uniquely. The words of Yahweh to Jeremiah are applicable to each one of us.

“Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, before you were born I dedicated you”. (Jer. 1, 5).

Jeremiah balked at this call from God. You might be doing that also. Jeremiah said he couldn’t speak for God and that he was too young. You may have other reasons that you think are more substantial. But the Lord says to you what he said to Jeremiah, Have no fear. I am with you”.

So we, too, who choose to be teachers, Christian educators, motivated by the circumstances of life and by our understanding of our abilities or our interests, must be willing to respond to the knowledge God had of us before we were conceived in our mother’s womb, the dedication he made of us before we were born: our vocation, the call God is giving us even now for this point in time at least, and possibly for the rest of our lives.

This is the basic reason why teachers are called ministers of grace, or perhaps more clearly, ministers of God Himself, the author of the gift of his grace.

St. De La Salle has several ways of expressing this in his writings. The quotation in our brochure is one: Let it be clear in all your relations with the children entrusted to your care that you look upon yourself as a minister of God (MTR.9,1).

In other places he writes that teachers are ministers of Jesus Christ, of the Church, and of the New Testament (MTR 9, 2, and 7, 3). He also speaks of teachers as “co-workers” with God, as ambassadors of Jesus Christ, God as it were appealing through the teacher, borrowing this imagery from St. Paul (I Cor. 9, 9, and II Cor 5, 20).

In a further reference to St. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, De La Salle reminds us that as teachers we hold a very special place in the hierarchy of vocations in the body of Christ, the Church. St. Paul ranks these gifts in order: first-apostles, second-prophets, third-teachers, then miracle workers, healers, assistants, administrators and those who speak in tongues (I Cor. 12, 28). If you are a hard-bitten teacher, it may not surprise you that you come before miracle workers, but it must be a gratifying surprise that you rank ahead of administrators.

Because teaching is a vocation from God, it is also a work of spiritual growth, or holiness, for the teachers themselves: they are fulfilling their own personal responsibility and their own destiny before God in devoting their talents to the well-being of the young people whom they serve. Everything they do for their students is part of their own religious experience, their relationship with God.

This understanding of the dignity of the teacher is a primary characteristic of the Lasallian school. It was something of a revolutionary development in the life of St. De La Salle. He himself wrote that when he first met the school teachers and began to help them, he considered them beneath

the social status of his manservant, his valet. But when he eventually threw his lot in with them, became as poor as they were and was organizing them into the Institute of the Brothers, he wrote in his meditations for them that they were doing the same work as the Priests and Bishops of the Church. He did not hesitate to say that they were carrying on the same vocation from God as the apostles and Jesus Christ himself. Think of that: the teachers who take their vocation seriously are collaborating with God himself for the good of the students who are entrusted to their care. Such is the dignity of a teacher.

We might reflect, too, that in today’s world it is well that God is collaborating in our work as teachers. Young people today seem at times to be desperately in need of the miraculous intervention of divine help to achieve maturity in the face of life’s challenges. The widespread use of all kinds of drugs, the atmosphere of sexual promiscuity and violence, terrorism, war, the prevalence of a very low self-esteem masked by bravado or manifest in terrible depression, the incidence of suicide among high school students, these are all symptoms of a profound confusion among the young about the meaning and purpose of life itself.

If we want a background for these symptoms, think of the considerable publicity given to the corruption among personnel in government, business and industry (labor unions for example), the erosion of standards of morality that can be accepted by the majority of people, the breakdown of family life, the high incidence of single-parent households, and even the tensions existing within the Church herself. Is there any wonder that the young are cynical and disillusioned with adults, confused about the meaning of life and very hesitant to commit themselves, to have faith in anyone, including God?

The young are living at a time when public opinion, revealed in all sorts of media as well as national polls, is not in conformity with the Gospel, when if they want to remain faithful to Christ and his teachings, they are often all alone. They have to be very lucky in their adult friends and very courageous in their own character to let the world know that they believe in Christ and show it by their decisions and their actions.

If teachers are at the core of the Lasallian School, as the brochure says so well, it is primarily as models for the faith and the values that are based on the faith, the truths that make life really and lastingly meaningful and joyful. While the academic purposes of the classroom cannot be short-changed, perhaps it has become more clear than ever that the most important purpose of the teacher is the communication of the true meaning of life, of the existence of God who is creator and loving Father, of the fact of the Incarnation and mission of the Church, and of the bond of love that unites all of us as children of God and brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ in the global village.

Teachers are said to be *at* the core of the Lasallian school. Presumably this means that they are at the center of the action, or at the heart of the school. Let it be added then that the students *are* the *core*, the center of the action, the heart of the school. Let it be further added that in the Lasallian school, it is not the intellect of the student, but the heart of the student, that is the ultimate center of the teacher’s attention. Again there is no intent to by-pass the intellectual purposes of the school, but only to insist that the final goal of the teacher is the whole being of the student, his total life.

This is why De La Salle says that the teacher must frequently pray for the gift of touching the hearts of the students, since this, he says, is the grace of state for the tea-

cher (December 7, 2). In another passage he says that "To touch the hearts of your students and to inspire them with the Christian spirit is the greatest miracle you can perform and one which God expects of you" (June 29, 3).

How then do teachers develop and preserve the profound spirit of faith in their vocation from God and have the power to affect the lives of their students not only intellectually but more especially in a spiritual way? Two qualities seem to be indispensable for this:

The first quality a teacher needs is prayerfulness. Lasallian teachers are prayerful in their own lives, and they make prayer a part of the classroom experience of their students. As the brochure states it, "(De La Salle) encourages the teaching ministers to recognize God's continual presence and his guiding spirit both in themselves and in the hearts and minds of students".

A familiarity with Scriptures is indispensable for any Christian who desires to be prayerful. The Lasallian teacher tries to read and pray over some part of the Bible every day. One of the best guides in this is the daily liturgy of the Church, both in the Christian's Prayer and in the daily Mass. This doesn't mean that the teachers must go to Mass every day; it may even be more important to set aside some time at the beginning or end of each day to read over these passages of Scripture reflectively and to discover in them what God is saying in them about the experiences of their daily lives, especially as teachers. It is a time, too, to pray for their students, one by one, asking God to bless them and help them through their individual problems.

De La Salle made prayer a part of the classroom activity. There were short prayers said actually every half hour of the day as well as morning and evening prayers for the students at the beginning and end of the day. That whole program is probably not feasible today in any of our classes, but the Lasallian teacher does not need a Supreme Court decision to make some prayer part of the classroom procedure. There are ways of doing this, of course, that are counter-productive, but there are also several ways open to the creativity of the teacher that will encourage authentic prayer in the lives of the students.

To discover what may be appropriate for a particular school in this matter is one of the purposes of this Workshop.

A second quality of Lasallian teachers, without which the exalted quality of prayerfulness runs the risk of being ineffective, is kindness. The grace of God is his kindness to us, the favor of his love that he gives us. It is in this sense that teachers are ministers of grace: they mediate the love of God to their students by their kindness.

De La Salle has a very insightful and quite contemporary description of good disciple when he writes that teachers must combine two balancing characteristics: firmness and gentleness. Three pages of his *Conduct of Schools* give a full picture of this balance (McGraw Hill, pp. 162-165). But when he speaks about effective communication of values, and of the faith in particular, he is unequivocal in his insistence on the need for kindness. His actual word is "tenderness". It is an attitude and a concrete practice of love. He is quite the psychologist when he says that unless there is an affective bond between the students and the teacher, the students will not accept the values that the teacher exemplifies (Easter 2, 2). He says, to quote him exactly, "Often reflect that, if you fail (to win the hearts of your students by your gentle manners), then instead of leading them to God, you will drive them from him" (April, 21, 3).

His understanding of this basic truth in human relationship goes beyond the purely natural laws. He says that

the work of God on the minds and hearts of students is conditioned by the relationship that the teacher forms with them. To quote him again, he says, "The greater tenderness you show to the children entrusted to your care, the more wonderful will be the effects of grace which God will effect in them" (June 11, 2). To paraphrase another passage in which the same transcendental thought is expressed, De La Salle says that when you have a true love for your students, the Spirit of God is operative in you creating that love and is able through your love to be creative in the students, enabling them to accept and to practice the good that you are teaching them (MTR, 2, 3).

This affective bond between the teacher and the student motivated by the sense of being a minister of God, has been historically the hallmark of the Lasallian school. It has proven itself especially in the concern for the less fortunate, the less gifted, the more unattractive of the students, those who are poor in any one of several ways. It is when the teachers have the ability to reach out and become truly helpful to these students that the Lasallian school can be recognized as authentic.

The Lasallian teachers take the time and the effort to know their students individually, and to treat them as unique individuals, relating to them beyond the exigencies of the subject matter and the strictly academic demands of knowledge, performance and examination results. They seek the full development of the students' personalities such as God has given them. They seek to touch the hearts, that is, the whole person of the students. This generally means that some time outside the classroom is given up by the teacher in order to meet the students at various informal occasions and to be available for personal conversation initiated by the student. While such relationships may be enjoyable to the teacher, it is not for such personal satisfaction that they are sought but primarily for the good of the students, especially those who are in need of the guidance and encouragement they do not receive from home. Many of them are desperately in need of and seeking such adult relationship, despite their adolescent drive for independence. Not all of this kind of educational work can or should be left to the guidance personnel, most of whom seem to spend most of their time with the students on strictly academic matters.

In summary and in conclusion, you as a Lasallian teacher are a minister of grace because God has chosen you mysteriously to be His personal representative to the students whom you teach. This is, indeed, a sacred trust as long as you choose to be a teacher. It means you have been appointed by God to communicate his truth and his love to your students. Both truth and love are indispensable to your role. Through a prayerful way of life, especially based on the reflective reading of Scriptures, you will deepen your faith in God and in the revelation of himself to you through Jesus Christ and the Church. What he wants you to teach your students will become so much a part of you that they will intuit it even before you tell them. Through prayer, too, you will enter into and share God's love for your students; you will receive the power of love to be patient, kind; you will never be rude, nor snobbish; you will not be prone to anger, nor to brood over injuries; you will be compassionate and generous (I Cor. 13). Because you have this love, your students will want to imitate you and God himself through his Holy Spirit will be working on their minds and hearts, giving them the power to live according to that truth and love that he has given you. Such is the dignity, the greatness of the Lasallian teacher. This is why the teacher is at the core of the Lasallian school.

Brother Augustine Loes