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PERSPECTIVE OF A RELIGIOUS EDUCATOR IN A SCIENCE CLASSROOM

The perspective that I'm going to take on this topic is a Lasallian perspective. What would it have meant to the Founder to be a religious educator? First, he had a very strong belief that God was at the center of who he was and what he did. As evidence of this, he wrote:

«The spirit of the Institute is first a spirit of faith which should induce those who compose it not to look upon anything but with the eyes of faith, not to do anything but in view of God and to attribute all to God.»

This is a fundamental thing that comes to us from the Founder, that all depends on Divine Providence. It's all God's plan. He writes:

«God is so good that he not only brings us into existence by His act of creation, but also desires that all of us come to the knowledge of truth.»

If God is at the center of my life, then all of my activity should be an opportunity for knowing Him better. It should be contemplative. This is one of the things that the Founder saw about the school which we sometimes tend to forget, that a school can be a place where contemplation is possible.

As evidence of this, we see that the Founder insisted that meditation was essential to the Brother's life. Also, the Founder had classes stopped every half hour so that students could remember that they were in God's presence by one student announcing. «Live Jesus in our hearts, forever.» This half-hour reminder stressed the concept that God is the center of all things.

From the **Management of Christian Schools** we read:

«It is the duty of a good master to inspire his pupils with a relish for and a habit of prayer and to induce them to form the custom of having recourse to God in the different circumstances of life and above all, in their personal trials and family afflictions. Every half hour a pupil should say aloud, "Let us remember that

we are in the holy presence of God." The exercises will be immediately suspended and the pupils and masters should recollect themselves for the space of an "Ave Maria". These prayers are useful to the master by helping him to renew to attention both towards himself and to the presence of God. They are useful to the pupils by habituating them to think of God from time to time during the day.»

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The next thing that was a fundamental belief was that in promoting the dignity of persons and the pursuit of truth, the Christian School can be a place where God is experienced. Where human persons are the center, where truth is the center, God is experienced. There is no separation or division there. The **Declaration** states:

«The day-to-day human experiences and the discovery of the secrets of the universe are presented there with their own inherent values. This, in turn, gives rise to question about the ultimate meaning of things that are charged with hidden and unnoticed potential. In their educational activity, the Brothers seek to integrate the effort for human development with the announcement of God's word. They are convinced that any education that respects the human person is a way to open people to God's grace and so dispose them to accept the faith.» So there is that connection between the human and the divine and where human persons are respected, there God can be found.

It is important to realize that the founder did have a kind of conversion experience that led him to the schools and it may be very different from our reasons to come to the schools. Because you decided you wanted to be a science teacher you looked for a school that would hire you and now you are at this place to talk about what that school is about and what it is like. However, the Founder set up a whole life-view which

had to do with the fact that God was the center of it. From there, he took the natural step to found the schools. Although we come to the school for different reasons, once we are here some important things can happen if we reflect on some of the truths and traditions that precede us.

These truths and traditions are what distinguish a Lasallian school. For an educator, at least for the religious educator teaching in a Lasallian school, it is important to realize what it is that is different about our schools.

The Founder talked from the very beginning about the fact our schools were conducted together and by association. This is an important value. The Brothers were to work together and assist each other. The schools were even built in such a way that the Brothers could look down at any time and see the other Brothers teaching. The highlight of my teaching, over the years, has been the times when I have worked with other people for the students. However, often our schools are divided into all sorts of ways that isolate teachers.

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Another characteristic was the special attention given to the poor. The Founder writes:

«You know that your duty requires you to instruct the poor. Endeavor to imitate this same kindness towards them and strive to overcome the promptings of nature when they suggest that you should more consideration for the rich than for the poor.»

Many times, it is the rich student, the one who has a little more intelligence, the one who looks better or is more talented, to which we gravitate. But it is the poor student that we need to give the special attention since this is a characteristic of our schools.

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A third characteristic was that the schools were gratuitous. The reason for this comes from the Founder's understanding of the gospel. When the students came to him they were all to be equal. There was to be no preference for anybody who had more money.

Obviously we cannot run free schools today. But we must not look like we are favoring the rich because they can pay tuition. We cannot have activities in the school that cater only to the rich. The Founder's way of dealing with this problem was to take money from anyone except those he was teaching.

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Another characteristic of the early schools was that the Founder perfected the simultaneous method of teaching. But there was an emphasis on the individual. The Founder emphasized having knowledge about the individual and developed a system whereby detailed files were kept on each student. From the very beginning, there was to be an emphasis on the individual's needs, his special ways of learning.

Also, the school was to be a formative place. It was not just a place to teach reading, writing, or religion, but it was where the whole student was formed.

The school was to be counter-cultural in the sense that it was based on the gospel. Then, as today, the school was to stand for real values and not values simply gleaned from elsewhere.

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Finally the school was characterized by a spirit of faith and zeal. The **Declaration** states:

«The Brother is totally immersed in the life of the students. He shares their interests, their worries, their hopes. He is not so much a school-master instilling a set of teachings as he is an older brother or sister who helps them to be aware of what the spirit is speaking within themselves, what their own abilities are, and little by little, how they may discover their true place in the world.»

In the Lasallian school the teacher is a sister, a brother, to her/his students and that is the kind of thing that characterizes her/his relationship with them.

As science teachers it is important that you know your subject matter very well and that you know the Church's stand on issues such as biogenetics, etc. You also have to be able to tell students when you have a problem with an issue; when you, yourself, have not completely resolved or sorted through an issue. I think it is legitimate to tell students that, «This is not something I have the answers to yet either». Since you are leading students to make informed decisions based on their consciences, you have to make available to them appropriate information, such as the Church's teachings.

One of the mistakes that young people make is that they want easy answers to everything. I don't think that is possible, especially in the world of science. But, you have to be able to tell them clearly what the Catholic Church teaches.

Brother Thomas Jones