

★ *lasalliana*

18 - 7 - B - 86

«THE LASALLIAN TRADITION»

Report on a symposium

In October, 1987, a symposium on "The Lasallian Tradition" was organized as part of the series of events held to honor the 125th anniversary of the founding of Saint Mary's College. Several participants requested that a follow-up symposium be organized, and it was –on Saturday, November 12, 1988. I acted as moderator for the occasion and took some notes with a view to presenting here a summary report. In this account I attempt to group together topics which were scattered throughout a discussion that lasted more than two hours among the sixty faculty, administration and staff members present.

BACKGROUND TOPICS MENTIONED

More than one speaker pointed out the need for historical background about St. John Baptist de La Salle and for some appropriate documentation for study purposes. La Salle's "Meditations" were mentioned as an example. A definition of the term, "Lasallian Tradition," was asked for, and a tentative one was forthcoming: "a set of developing educational beliefs, attitudes, and policies handed down through generations of Brothers and lay teachers from St. John Baptist de La Salle –a heritage that has always emphasized working in schools primarily for the poor, schools as communities engaged in Christian religious instruction and in the human development of students through quality education, and schools characterized by a brotherly concern for persons, for institutional stability and good order, of a non-clerical, non-elitist, and non-Jansenist kind."

In order to make this tradition the possession of all the members of the College community, readings and seminars should be organized.

On the other hand, it was asked, is not this tradition the sole proprietorship of the Brothers? Perhaps the rest of the College community can participate only in the "spirit" of La Salle, while the Brothers alone own the tradition. This distinction occasioned several comments: some speakers saying that all people of good will at the College are sharers and shapers of the tradition, that we all have access to it, that there never has been discrimination, that in Lasallian matters there should be "a level playing field" for everyone. At any rate, none of us should be ignorant of it; and maybe some lay teachers, especially those with no family obligations, can actually be devoted to it as much as the Brothers. Is it correct to say that the future of the College depends on the prime possessors of the Tradition, the Brothers, who must present the rest of us with plans?

Moreover, beyond individual commitment to the tradition, there is an institutional or corporate commitment to which we can all contribute in varying degrees. It was claimed that by a kind of osmosis we can all (students included) absorb the spirit of the institution and acquire its focus. There is no secret fraternity in this matter. In fact, it may be that we all participate to the extent that we are dedicated to the goals of the College, exhibit human decency, do our work professionally, etc. –since La Salle's life was spent in training just such teachers. We become thereby "Lasallian family members," i.e., more than "employees" of the College.

KEY TERMS DISCUSSED

One of the key words in the tradition is that of "brother." We should all be brotherly in our approach to each other and to the students. To be brothers and sisters means that coercion and competition are inappropriate at the College, and that consultations are appropriate. A family spirit was shown by the motto on La Salle's coat of arms, *Indivisa Manent*, keep undivided.

But, it was warned, we must beware giving to the Lasallian Tradition dimensions that are only humanistic.

Another key word is much more troublesome: "poor". Do we want an extrinsic, sociological definition of "poor," or, in some way, a more intrinsic one? From the very beginning of the "Christian Schools," their success has attracted a well-to-do clientele. The early Brothers' schools were victims of that success. But in La Salle's lifetime even the rich were not charged for classroom instruction— all the schools were maintained by outside financial support (by parishes, municipalities, patrons, etc.). Does this tradition actually go all the way back to Socrates who also refused to charge for instruction? His concern for truth, and only truth, required him not to muddy the waters of education with student fees. Or does the tradition of gratuitous instruction stem from the counter-Reformation in which the Church was anxious to save the poor as well as the rich from Protestant doctrine? If so, there is now a crisis: not only is there today no longer a counter-Reform spirit, there seems to be no desire to pursue truth in the Socratic sense. In particular, one speaker inquired, do we not today shift our instructional aims away from truth for its own sake to training-for-doing? Isn't vocational preparation the preoccupation of most colleges' curricula? Have we not lost the concern for truth (which was the claim of the catechisms which were at the heart of La Salle's schools)? If so, we may react pessimistically, or we may react by seeing in the situation a real opportunity for evangelization. It is true that La Salle had a reputation for including a lot of practical, vocational material in his schools, but for him this was a lure to bring children to the truths of the catechism. At the same time, of course, he insisted on quality training (e.g., in

mastery of vernacular French) with a view to assuring a secure living for the students in society. A student participant suggested: by teaching college students to think, we may show our concern for truth itself. Such an effort may be called "pre-evangelization;" at least, that is the attitude of Brothers in missionary schools where the student population is often largely non-Christian.

VOCATION NEEDED

There was considerable discussion about terms like "vocation," "career," and "job". Vocation is etymologically a "call" and came to mean a call from God; but that language has been replaced by expressions such as "sense of identity" —meaning that God calls us to be our true selves. And, unfortunately, modern work places do not often provide careers where our true selves can be realized. Hence careers and jobs must be distinguished, regrettably, from vocations. For both lay teachers and religious teachers the notion of vocation can be a unifying idea. And in both cases, it can be subsumed under the idea of "Providence." Each of us as a unique person is a mystery; our providential vocation is a means to energize each of us but also to give us a ministry to carry our vision to the institution. "Abandonment to divine providence" was one of La Salle's teachings (characteristic of the spirituality of his day), but one which is difficult to translate into terms acceptable to modern sensibility. Perhaps we could speak of a force moving us to integrity. There remains, however, the fact that we do not live up to our ideals; reality intrudes. The resulting tension should be creative.

Brother Brendan Kneale