

THE LASALLIAN SCHOOL AS IT FACES THE FUTURE

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This is a delicate subject, because in speaking of schools and education, you can easily be trapped by some kind of Utopia.

There is another danger in speaking of the future, even the immediate future: that of being taken in by too easy an optimism: "tomorrow will be much better than today".

I personally think that it will be just the opposite: we must prepare the young for a difficult and complex world; it is our task to train them to face it to the best of their ability.

With the above in mind, I want to sketch out some of the main characteristics of the Lasallian school, and to show how this kind of school can help to meet educational needs in the third millennium.

The Lasallian school is a history still in the making, which is rooted in a certain vision of youth, of schools and of the world, moreover it is faithful to a special spirit.

1. The Lasallian school is a history.

● We know that St. De La Salle and the first brothers drew up, and then evolved, in the society they were living in, a plan for the elementary education and Christian formation of the poor children of certain French towns in the time of the Sun King, Louis XIV.

Therefore, St. De La Salle and those Brothers, more by deeds than by words, affirmed:

- the right of every child to an education fitting his situation.
- the need to ensure the finances to cover this education. That is the meaning of the gratuity which the Saint fought for.
- the liberty of parents to choose the school they wanted: this was a premonition of the future struggles against state monopoly.

● It is a history in which educational plans became adapted to the countries, situations, circumstances of the times and the needs of the future, as the latter gradually came into sight.

To read the history of the Brothers' schools is to find oneself in the presence of successful enterprises from the time of the Founder and throughout the two and a half centuries which have followed.

- organisation of elementary schools.
- in the XVIII century, the founding of boarding schools with courses for middle class children.
- the start of modern secondary school programmes, with less emphasis on Latin.
- technical schools.
- agricultural schools; (Blessed Brother Arnould taught in an agricultural school, before becoming director of novices.)
- nowadays various types of school exist, according to each country and its needs.

The schools of the early days had two characteristics:

- They flourished at a time when the state had not built up its own national educational system. The liberty thus afforded allowed the Brothers to be pioneers in the educational field.
- Their schools were staffed entirely by Brothers: they were in literally Brothers' schools.

● In our days a new chapter is opening in the history of the schools inherited from St. De La Salle. Let us say that this has been going on for the past thirty years. For a multitude of reasons, staffing in schools has become more and more lay, not primarily of Brothers.

Three results follow from this:

- **firstly:** a change of name from Brothers' school to Lasallian school.
- **secondly:** a new chapter is beginning, and is, as it should be, being written by a team made up of Brothers and lay staff. As mentioned in the Rule, *"the Brothers' community is ever mindful that its apostolic activity takes place within an educational community in which all the functions, including the responsibilities are shared."* (17a) The history of the present day Lasallian school will either be a joint effort by laity and Brothers or it will just vanish.
- **thirdly:** the Lasallian school is run today, in nearly every country, alongside educational systems prevailing in those countries. In some places this fact results in an agreement between Lasallian schools and the state, as in the case of other catholic schools.

This means that our schools, planted in the middle of whatever prevailing educational system, should be different, and "be seen to be different" from other schools. I recall the words of Brother John Johnston, addressed to the Latin American Brothers Visitors, at the end of a week's work in Fusagasuga, Colombia: *"We are a significant group of educators, 40,000, counting Brothers and lay staff, ready to 'offer something different' in the modern educational world"*.

We can say that this is the biggest challenge to the Lasallian school as it faces the future.

2. The Lasallian school will confront this challenge if it does not forget that its inspiration is derived from a very definite vision.

Let me outline this vision as I understand it. Once more I quote the text of the Brothers' Rule: *"John Baptist De La Salle was deeply moved by the way in which 'the children of the artisans and the poor' were abandoned and left to themselves. As a practical response to the prayerful consideration of this fact in relation to God's plan of salvation, he came to discern, in faith, what God wanted the mission of the Institute to be."*

What are the components of this vision?

– In the first place it is a **vision of the reality which surrounds us**. The Lasallian school was founded, it exists today and it will continue to exist in the future, whenever and wherever there are educators aware of the needs of youth, especially of poor youth (with poverties of various kinds); educators who moreover become impressed by the poverty, frustration and desertion of youth, all of which are becoming more and more evident, even in developed countries.

– Secondly, it is a **vision of faith**.

According to this vision, the young person is not just a someone in front of me, the educator; he is not only the future citizen or the future technician that I am trying to train. He is also a "son of God", called to grow, to evolve, to fulfil his role in today's and tomorrow's world, in keeping with his own vocation.

The educator, according to the teaching of Saint de La Salle, finds in the person of his students a sign and a call from the Spirit.

In this vision of faith, the educator, who follows St. de La Salle, is not only a teacher who directs his students to finding out what they need to know; neither is he merely an educator who awakens the potential in his students. But he is "an ambassador and minister of Jesus Christ", and should consider himself as such.

– To sum up, the Lasallian vision of education attempts to **make the school a place where adults and young persons live and work together**. But above all this, Lasallian education demands that the educational community try to become a community of believers, who live, nourish, share and rejoice in their faith in Jesus Christ.

This vision of faith will tell us what world we must prepare for those we are educating, and how we must prepare it with them. We will be helped in this by some of the main themes proposed by Pope John Paul II in his many announcements and in some of his encyclicals:

- the Christian vision of human labour.
- a vision of our earth, which we must conquer so that it can supply the needs of all, and which, far from destroying, we must respect;

- a vision of humanity whose inequalities can be rectified only by interdependence, a relying on one another;
- a vision of humanity, which can make progress only by respecting the value of human dignity and the fundamental rights of man.

The French writer André Malraux says: *"The XX1 Century will be either spiritual or non-existent"*. What has happened and continues to happen in Eastern Europe seems to be proving him right.

The future of Lasallian education is bound to the need of its identity being nourished and rooted in the most authentic expression of spirituality, that is to say: the spirit of the Gospel.

3. The Lasallian school evolves and lives in a fidelity to a spirit expressed in an enterprise.

The Lasallian educational enterprise is focussed on a definite way of conceiving and understanding education. This spirit is translated into a daily reality. I shall now offer you four elements of this spirit:

– Forming young people **to be competent and capable of "filling their post in life"** and ready to fulfil their role in a complex and competitive society.

– Educating and forming young people to a **sense of solidarity**, in the first place in the community of their school, and next with the poor who surround them.

– Forming **young people capable of reflecting**, of using their critical powers in a world where the means of communication are conditioning and forcing people to conform to a common way of seeing things and of thinking. One of the greatest dangers to our "hypermedianised" world is the worship of the "trivial". The Rule tells us: *"The Brothers train their students to adopt a critical stance towards contemporary society, particularly as regards the mass media and the many other technological resources that are part of today's world"*. (13c).

One of the challenges of the Lasallian school in today's world is to lead the young towards interior life.

– Forming the young in a **spiritual sense**, forming them to welcome the faith, prayer and a commitment to serving others. All this is based on catechesis and on the general atmosphere of the school, which is founded on the fraternity of teachers with teachers, teachers with students, and students with fellow students.

I believe that if, with everyone's cooperation, –Brothers, teachers, parents and young people–, the Lasallian school of tomorrow continues to be built around this vision and in this spirit, its already long history will continue as before to bear fruit, for the benefit of youth and society and for the building up of the church.