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# Spirituality and Higher Education: Perspectives from Service-Learning

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Becoming co-workers with God: Lasallian spirituality  
and Service-Learning

3.7

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## 7. BECOMING CO-WORKERS WITH GOD: LASALLIAN SPIRITUALITY AND SERVICE-LEARNING

Michael Valenzuela, FSC

De La Salle College of Saint Benilde

### Lasallian Spirituality: A Précis

Born into a wealthy family of Rheims in 1651 and ordained at the age of 26, John Baptist de La Salle seemed destined for a steady rise within the ecclesiastical hierarchy when he abandoned fortune and social privilege to form an association of lay schoolmasters dedicated to the Christian education of poor and abandoned children. In the years that followed, De La Salle and the Brothers of the Christian Schools made quality education and Christian formation accessible to the poor, introducing significant educational reforms and innovations that laid the groundwork for modern education. Through their pioneering efforts in the training and formation of teachers, they brought dignity to a disparaged profession, making of it a genuine Christian vocation. De La Salle was canonized in 1900 by Pope Leo XIII and was named patron saint of teachers 1950. There are nearly 4000 Brothers of the Christian Schools today sharing the educational mission, spirituality and charism with more than 70,000 educators in nearly 80 countries.

*What we today call Lasallian spirituality grew out of the lived experience of this community of schoolmasters who came to understand themselves as called by God to participate in the integral salvation of poor and abandoned youth.*

What we today call Lasallian spirituality grew out of the lived experience of this community of schoolmasters who came to understand themselves as called by God to participate in the integral salvation of poor and abandoned youth. It is not the product of irenic contem-

plation but emerges from the internal disruption born of a confrontation between faith in a loving God who wills that all be saved and an encounter with the suffering and spiritual alienation of young people unable to live fully human lives. It is a praxis-oriented spirituality driving a continuing process of engagement and discernment in response to the needs of young people, particularly those lacking opportunities for integral human development.

Lasallian spirituality is rooted in a double contemplation – of God’s inclusive and redemptive love on the one hand, and on the other, the hunger of youth-at-risk for a life

lived with dignity and meaning. (Salm, 2017). The overturning of complacency and the profound compassion such contemplation awakens in the hearts of teachers, echoes, however faintly, the ardent love and pathos of the Father for his most vulnerable children. In one meditation, De La Salle writes:

*You must in this imitate God to some extent, for he so loved the souls he created that when he saw them involved in sin and unable to be freed from sin by themselves, the zeal and affection that he had for their salvation led him to send his own Son to rescue them from their miserable condition. This is what made Jesus Christ say that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him may not die but may have eternal life. What must you not do for them in your ministry if you have zeal for their salvation! (De La Salle, 2007, p. 453)*

For those who feel as God feels and who are open to grace and risk, such contemplation moves one to unite oneself to God for the liberation and salvation of those deprived of dignity and opportunities for full humanization. The fundamental spiritual experience that animates the Lasallian educational project is the ardent and unshakeable love of God that stays faithful to sinful, suffering and vulnerable young people even unto the cross. For educators in the Lasallian tradition, fidelity to God demands fidelity to young people whatever their situation.

Christian education is a participation in the “work of God” in the Pauline sense – it is a concrete, historical manifestation of the ongoing mystery by which God draws human beings out of spiritual alienation and into loving communion. Thus, the Christian educator is a “co-worker with God”, an “ambassador of Christ”, a “mediator” and “minister of reconciliation” between God and young people. The teacher who represents Christ to the young contemplates the master’s words and deeds in order to arrive at an inward conformity to Christ in his virtues, attitudes, and intentions. Teachers are to imitate especially Christ’s love and zeal to save those damaged and broken by life, by the gratuity and generosity of their care and concern, by their abandonment to God from whom they receive the grace needed for their work, and by bearing difficulties and sacrifices they face as a participation in the paschal mystery.

The work of God unfolds in and through the medium of human relationships. The tender and disinterested concern of teachers for their students awakens the latter to their innate dignity, builds trust, and makes them more open to learning, mentoring, and correction. Such relationships often have a sacramental depth for both student and teacher: for students because the teacher’s disinterested concern incarnates God’s saving love, and for teachers, because through their concern for their students, God invites them to transcend egoism and move towards the integrity and unselfish love that constitutes spiritual freedom and holiness.

Such cooperation with God entails cultivating an abiding awareness of God's presence in people and in everyday events with a view to responding to God's continual invitations to love, serve, and grow. Teachers who see their work as ministry must be poised to embrace God's will as it presents itself to them in their daily responsibilities and in the unmet needs of young people, trusting in God to make their efforts bear fruit. Such spirituality makes no distinction between pursuing one's own salvation and fulfilling one's professional duties.

As De La Salle writes,

*When they carry out well the service of guides and leaders of the souls entrusted to them, they fulfill at the same time their own duties before God. God will fill them with so much grace that they will be made holy while they are contributing as far as they are able to the salvation of others. (De La Salle, 2007, p. 463)*

Efforts at personal sanctification and all spiritual exercises must be directed to ensuring the human and spiritual welfare of those entrusted to one's care. This outlook contributes to a remarkable synthesis of faith and work, of spiritual life and professional engagement.

Mission generates communion. Fraternal solidarity is built as teachers share challenges, burdens and blessings together. This fraternal communion, which Lasallians call "association for mission", makes mutual support and accompaniment possible and facilitates collaboration in creating educational initiatives that serve the cause of humanization and spiritual liberation. Ultimately, both mission and fraternity find their source in the Triune God who draws all humanity into a communion of life and love.

### **Service Learning at De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde**

The De La Salle College of Saint Benilde is a professional school in the Lasallian tradition, which in the words of its mission-statement, is "*committed to building a just and humane society by being at the forefront innovative education that is accessible to the poor and diversely-gifted learners*". Since its beginnings as a night college in 1980, Benilde has gained a reputation for its innovative professional courses, its pioneering efforts at promoting inclusion in tertiary education, its leadership in tertiary deaf education and advocacy, its programs for continuing professional education, and as a seedbed for the creative industries. Making education more accessible to underserved sectors (the economically disadvantaged, those with special learning needs, persons with disabilities) and challenging students and faculty to innovate in response to social needs were formally adopted as strategic directions for the school in 2013.

The late St. John Paul II in his encyclical *Laborem Exercens* pointed out that “*Human work is a key, probably the essential key to the whole social question*”. (John Paul II, 1981, LE, 3) This has relevance for Lasallian schools tasked with integrating practical education with Christian formation in order to prepare young people for the world of work. This task has become increasingly daunting in contexts where religion is either met with disaffection or else largely privatized. Today, many who profess religious belief turn out to be “secularizers” for whom faith plays no role in professional life and business or else “spiritualizers” for whom pious intentions fail to translate into more just and humane directions, policies and

*The Lasallian intuition is that professional excellence, social responsibility, and the quest for holiness become integrated when undertaken in faith as part of God’s creative and redemptive work in the world. This integration is what the De La Salle College of Saint Benilde proposes to its students and service learning is one important strategy in helping to accomplish this.*

practices. (Alford & Naughton, 2001, pp. 10-15). In contrast, the Lasallian intuition is that professional excellence, social responsibility, and the quest for holiness become integrated when undertaken in faith as part of God’s creative and redemptive work in the world. This integration is what the De La Salle College of Saint Benilde proposes to its students and service learning is one important strategy in helping to accomplish this.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis excoriates the idolatry of wealth that engenders an economy of exclusion and a “throwaway culture” in which even human beings are mere resources to be exploited and discarded (Francis I, 2013, EG, 52-67). If work is indeed the key to the social question, there is a need to propose a more humanizing vision of work as well as a spirituality that can help us deal with the problems that face us as members of one human family bound together on a planet *in extremis*. Perpetuating a vision of work and business narrowly focused on maximizing profits will not do. For this reason, a good number of Benildean educators were already engaging students in projects that brought them in contact with the concrete challenges of inclusive and sustainable development prior to the formal implementation of service learning in 2018-19.<sup>22</sup> The adoption of service

22 For example, in 2018 Benilde students redesigned and renovated four community day care centers catering to low-income families based on dialogues with the clientele, with community leaders and student research on principles of early childhood learning and development. They also raised the funds to complete the project and provide added learning resources. Architecture students seeking to address garbage-dumping in a public waterway worked with the local community to create a floating community center that would provide the local community with incentive to take responsibility for keeping the waterways clean.

learning in all degree programs and requiring students to engage in at least two collaborative projects consistent with the school's mission and addressing sustainable development goals gives institutional recognition, intentionality, and sustainability to a ferment already underway.<sup>23</sup>

Benilde's service-learning framework acknowledges Lasallian spirituality as being foundational to the college's service-learning program and the very mission of the college itself:

*At the core of DLS-CSB's service-learning program framework is Lasallian spirituality that influences and inspires the vision-mission of DLS-CSB and the Benildean expressions of the Lasallian core values. This core is what guides and drives the implementation of the Service-Learning program. (Anicete et al., 2015)*

Service learning at Benilde invites students to regard their prospective professions as means of promoting human dignity and the common good in keeping with the College of St. Benilde's vision-mission, its commitments to innovation and inclusion, Benildean expressions of Lasallian core values (which link God-centeredness with respect for persons in their uniqueness, social responsibility, solidarity with the poor, and professional excellence), and the college's social development framework.

## Lasallian Spirituality and Service Learning

Despite being a spirituality particular to educators, elements of Lasallian spirituality have relevance for anyone seeking to integrate faith, social responsibility and professional life – an important function of Catholic tertiary-level institutions and in particular, for a professional school like the De La Salle-College of St. Benilde. Here are some ways in which a Lasallian-inspired spirituality supports and deepens service learning:

1. Framing professional life as a participation in the creative and redemptive work of God in the world challenges young people to regard their prospective professions as means for addressing the pain-points of a world *in extremis*. In so doing, students are invited to pursue an integrative vocational orientation over the conventional profit-orientation that has led to many of the social and environmental problems we see today. Reimagining the purpose of work in this way puts service

<sup>23</sup> Some examples of onsite service learning projects include fashion design students providing training on textile design to Gawang Kamay a people's livelihood organization while multimedia arts students designed and created the organization's marketing collaterals. Hotel and restaurant management students conducted waste management surveys in urban poor communities to provide baseline data for local government's urban waste management program. Since the pandemic, service learning has shifted to an online platform.

to the common good and the promotion of human dignity as intrinsic to the nature and purpose of work in keeping with Catholic social teaching. This feeds the spiritual hunger for meaning and purpose which is often a casualty of looking at work merely as a means to earning a living.

2. Engaging in the double-contemplation that stirs one to compassionate engagement and solidarity has merit in broader contexts when the cries one attends to belong to those whom society neglects, or even victims of oppressive social, cultural, economic, and political forces. Recognizing that God is at work in one's particular circumstances moving one to make life-giving choices helps young people become attentive to existential, social, political and cultural realities, to attend to concrete details, to bring rigor to their analysis of problems, and to be on the lookout for life-giving possibilities in difficult situations.
3. This same double-contemplation and the strongly relational character of Lasallian spirituality underscores the innate dignity of persons as objects of God's covenant love. It invites students to prioritize persons in every project, to treat each one – no matter their circumstances- with unconditional respect. It encourages students to build relationships that favor collaboration, to empathize as they listen to their clients' views, experiences and stories, to be genuinely concerned for their welfare- an important check to the tendency in service learning to instrumentalize client-communities.
4. Lasallian spirituality links professional excellence, innovation, accountability, and consciousness of craft to zeal for the welfare of those served. Students acquire a deeper appreciation for their craft when they realize its potential for contributing to the common good and improving a client-community's quality of life. This links work to higher purpose – a key factor in intrinsic motivation. Thus, mastery and continual self-improvement become a spiritual-vocational exigency.
5. The Lasallian emphasis on fraternal collaboration and solidarity in the fulfillment of a common mission favors the building of such relations among team members as well as members of the client-community in order to assure a project's success and sustainability over time. It challenges students to move beyond paternalism to the genuine friendship and mutuality that humanizes them even as it dignifies the client.
6. A Lasallian-inspired spirituality favors the integration of spiritual life, professional commitment, and social responsibility – an integration much needed in a world

where the exile of moral and spiritual values from professional life and business has led to disengagement, dehumanization, and damage to society and the environment.

7. Such a spirituality helps students deal with the anxiety, frustration and cynicism that can arise from realizing the depth and intractability of the more serious social problems they encounter. Abandoning oneself to God knowing that the results are in God's hands provides a much-needed blend of realism and hope. What God requires is that one do one's best without being overly-anxious about what lies beyond one's control. No charitable effort is ever wasted for God makes even our flawed contributions fruitful for ourselves and for the building of God's Kingdom. Such trust in God sustains fortitude in the face of difficulties.

*By adapting Lasallian spirituality to encompass all professions which promote human dignity and the common good, a Lasallian-inspired program of service learning can make a meaningful contribution to helping persons of faith bridge the gap between faith and professional life as well as challenge them to respond as professionals to local and global threats to the humanum.*

Responsiveness to needs, a defining characteristic of Lasallian education, is rooted in a spirituality that frames the work of education as a participation in God's saving work in the world. By adapting Lasallian spirituality to encompass all professions which promote human dignity and the common good, a Lasallian-inspired program of service learning can make a meaningful contribution to

helping persons of faith bridge the gap between faith and professional life as well as challenge them to respond as professionals to local and global threats to the *humanum*. Given the seriousness of the problems we face locally and globally, this is not an insignificant contribution.

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*Uniservitate* is a global programme for the promotion of service-learning in Catholic Higher Education. Its objective is to generate a systemic change in Catholic Higher Education Institutions (CHEIs) through the institutionalisation of service-learning (SL) as a tool to achieve its mission of offering an integral education and training of agents of change committed to their community.

***“We will not change the world, if we do not change education”***

*Pope Francis*

### **3** Spirituality and Higher Education: Perspectives from Service-Learning

A research topic that is increasingly attracting the attention of the academic world is the link between teaching and spirituality, understood in its broadest sense. This will be the focus of the volume that we present to our readers today. The aim is to provide, both for Catholic Institutions of Higher Education and universities at large, a space for reflection in their itinerary of discernment about their identity and specific mission.

This book, the third of the Uniservitate collection, explores these topics, bringing together research and experiences of international scope, from the Catholic university world as well as of other creeds and non-religious convictions, which delve into service-learning from the ethics of care and fraternity.

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