

CHARACTERISTICS OF LASALLIAN EDUCATION

My role this evening is to give an introductory overview of the characteristics of Lasallian education. I would like, therefore, to offer a twofold invitation. First, I ask that, over this weekend, you affirm the many ways your experience is Lasallian. I hope that you will realize that many of the things you already do, we name them Lasallian as a way to characterize them as carrying on the living tradition that started with St. La Salle and that we hope all of us, the Brothers, our colleagues, everyone who is interested in real education, will share in.

Although the term, Lasallian Education, comes from an emphasis on a tradition, the original vision of St. La Salle and the ways that tradition has grown and adapted itself to the present, is a tradition that is shared by others, both within the Catholic tradition as well as those who really understand education. So it is a way of naming something and perhaps is a symbol for us, a way in which we can share something in common.

Secondly, the invitation is that you consciously name and join with us, the Brothers, in that participation of keeping alive St. La Salle's initial vision; keeping alive those definite and certain characteristics of the education we provide. It is an invitation to all of you that you would incorporate the Lasallian tradition into your own tradition, way of thinking, your religious tradition and the tradition of faith from which you operate; that you would make it your own, that you would share it with us and therefore, we would keep it alive and adapt it to the students entrusted to our care.

This is an invitation and a carrying-on of the tradition that is going on throughout the world. It extends cross-culturally and to seventy-two countries. The vision or goal, finally, is to have a world in which, both on a political and social point of view, one will come across colleagues and students who will have heard the same invitation, who will have heard the same message, who will participate and will finally share a common set of values that we hope will make the world a better place.

We will talk, then, about two different ways in which to look at the characteristics of a Lasallian school. One will be about the school in general, the overall philosophy, the ways in which you, as belonging to a community of teachers, participate in the overall movement. The other will be to draw attention to a few specific characteristics as they apply to us as educators.

For a Lasallian school, the most important principle is it is centered on the young. It is centered around their needs, not ours. The ways in which we make decisions about curriculum and schedules, the ways in which we order our own lives is centered on what is best for them. We take into account that the young have to live in a world that keeps changing quickly and they need to be prepared to take their rightful place. Thus, the concept of quality comes out of a concern for the young and everything we do, the expenses that are involved with it, the degree to which we personally rearrange our own lives, is because we are looking forward to what their needs are and the kind of world in which they will live.

What we hope is by coming to us and being with us in elementary school, secondary school, and the collegiate world, they will not only have a better chance of taking their rightful place in the world, but they will take it with a certain set of values. They will take it with a certain set of priorities about how to use the kind of power we give them through an education. We want to give them the means of salvation through a quality education.

Their education is not solely for their own benefit, it is also for the benefit of the society in which they live. This is their salvation –to love their neighbor as themselves. This is an explicit proclamation of Jesus Christ and we need to be faithful to this message as Jesus was. The same ways in which He combatted all forms of prejudice and exclusion must be our ways.

There are implications then for us as Lasallian educators. The Rule mentions that we are invited to look upon our professional work as a ministry. It is not just a job. It is not just something for our own benefit in terms of the glory, prestige, or power we receive. It is a ministry, meaning it is ordered for others. It is for other's benefit. It is through us that our students are going to hear and experience the love of God. So, how we relate to them and how we teach them becomes as important as what we teach. We need to be attentive and available in a brotherly and sisterly companionship.

We want them to discover, appreciate, assimilate, both human and Gospel values. It is very important that we experience both these values in an integrated fashion. The best there is about being human needs to be available to them and be integrated with a set of Gospel values. Sometimes there is conflict and we need to think about it and we need to assist them to think about it and work their way through it. Compassion is often in conflict with competition, so sometimes we are going to have to make a choice. The Gospel ways of accepting people is not always going to be supported very well by the demands we see made on people in society. So there will be a conflict. By modeling and helping them think their way through to decisions, we will assist them to come to know that they are the children of God.

If we define them and ourselves as a family under God, then there is a set of implications about how we treat and relate to one another. It is an invitation, the invitation of Jesus. He does not force Himself on anyone, he just keeps offering, keeps announcing. In the same manner, so should we.

As from the beginning, our Lasallian emphasis on a concern for the poor has to be constantly present. If, for practical reasons and historical circumstances, we find ourselves

committed to other groups in society, this particular characteristic still has to ring true. We have to constantly examine what is causing the problems of poverty in our society and then turn our, and our students', attention to the best ways to promote justice and human dignity.

Let me turn now to a few implications. It seems to me that what ought to be foremost in our minds, as Lasallian teachers, is: Am I teaching in such a way that I am fostering critical thinking? Am I teaching them to use authority as the least of the arguments for validity? Am I teaching them to examine several alternatives before making a choice about what seems to be best?

There is a need to insure that students see connections between areas of study, rather than learning isolated units of information. For example, at some point, the students need to see that learning Euclidian geometry is really only the beginning and the kind of physics that comes out of Euclidian geometry is very limited. If it were not for Lobachevski in geometry, we would not have the kind of physics we have today. For them to get a sense of this kind of connection is very important.

I think our discipline and our grading have to give testimony to justice. If we say that part of their responsibility is to promote and work for a just world, and if that is not their experience when with us, then there is real trouble; for there exists a real contradiction. So the ways we grade and discipline will say more to them about justice than what we say to them.

Interest and availability to individual students is an important characteristic of the Lasallian teacher. Because of their individual needs some students will need more attention from us than others. All of this must be balanced in an appropriate way with your other responsibilities. But for so many of them, the fact that we care whether they learn or not, makes all the difference in the world.

Perhaps the most important characteristic is that we pray for our students. There are things that are beyond our capability and there are things that happen to them that are beyond our way of taking credit. So, to have the habit of actually thinking about individual students in prayer and saying a prayer for them is an integral part of what it means to be a Lasallian educator. St. La Salle wanted us to make sure that we always had the best interests of the students at hand and the way we can come to that is with the help of the Holy Spirit. So, keeping them in mind, one by one, face by face, name by name, in prayer is essential.

As science teachers you are concerned about methodology being balanced against the pressure for covering content. The pressure comes from parents and the students themselves. The pressure comes, sometimes, from your own sense of how much they need to know before they go to the next level. And yet, the question of methodology is very important. Are they learning in a competitive or cooperative

mode? Are they at one another's throat in lab or are they actually helping one another? Our methodology has all kinds of messages and values embedded in it and so it is imperative that we constantly review our methodology.

Fostering wonder and awe is important. To destroy the sense of wonder and awe for them is a terrible thing. Darwin wrote that he had great regret that he allowed that part of his mind and his sensitivities to be atrophied by only applying certain laws of reason and rational thought and that he no longer could respond to poetry or music in a way he had experienced in an earlier time in his life. His mind had become such that he simply took in information and ground out generalizations and he saw himself as having been much poorer.

The question of faith and science is a major concern, obviously both in our culture at this present time, as it has been throughout history. Faith experience, organized religion, and science have not always had a harmonious relationship. Yet, there are examples of the ways in which it has. D'Chardin is a marvelous testimony to the ways in which a faith life can be integrated with competence in science. So for us to read the "Divine Milieu" or the "Phenomenon of Man" and to work our way through the questions of faith and science so as to help our students is a very important responsibility.

There are moral issues that confront us either because they are in direct relationships to Church teaching or they are larger questions with which the whole society has to deal. We have a responsibility to not just shove off these questions onto the Religion Department. There may be a need to pursue ways to have a dialogue with the Religion department or the Social Studies department so that with the students a real learning experience develops for everyone.

If we really are saying the touchstone is to prepare the student for the kind of world they are going to live in, then we need to be attuned to what kind of world exists now and what kind it is becoming. Most of our students are going to live in a world where cultural differences and geographic boundaries mean nothing. So the ways in which they are to learn about and adapt to different cultures and people is a major responsibility of ours.

In conclusion, while we know that the purpose of education is, of course, the development of the mind, we Lasallian educators are equally interested in touching hearts. We want them to be certain kinds of persons at the end of the educational experience they have with us. We accomplish that mission with an ardent zeal for the work of the Lord. We generously place at the disposal of those whom God has entrusted to us, our time, our talents, our energy. We seek to improve our competence, the quality of our relationships, the witness of our lives, and the vigor of our faith.

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