

REFLECTIONS
ON MY RECENT ENCOUNTER
WITH LASALLIAN TEACHERS
IN THE PHILIPPINES

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Imagine yourself with an invitation to spend a month working in the Philippines on the island of Negros as a guest of the Christian Brothers. The Saint Mary's College Brothers raise the money to send you, and the Brothers in the Philippines shelter and feed you as part of their commitment to an ongoing project called "The Overseas Awareness and Service Program." How do you feel about this invitation? Are your family and friends less than excited about your opportunity? What do you know about the Philippines? Are there reasons to be afraid?

You are commissioned at a Mass in the Saint Mary's College chapel as a kind of missionary. What does being a missionary mean to you? Do the Lasallian teachers need you? What do you have to give to the Filipinos?

My journey earlier this year is still fresh. I had accepted the invitation, and after much preparation and support from the Brothers and from Gery Short, the Coordinator of the Program, I arrived in Manila December 30, 1991, to prepare for my work in Bacolod City at the St. La Salle University Integrated School. I had not imagined what was ahead, beyond giving talks, doing workshops, and consulting with teachers.

My month in the Philippines was in many ways simple and ordinary. I observed teachers in the classrooms, discussed their teaching with them, and gave workshops designed to explore questions that came up in our conferences. I was up early in the morning and worked late, yet, I felt invigorated. I noticed that the faculty, from prep school through the university, reflected the same energetic feeling I had. Though my tasks from day to day were familiar ones, I came away with a sense of fullness, a renewal of faith, and a dedication to the Lasallian community life.

It seems that in the simple and ordinary routines of living we are given a chance to find the threads to meaning in life.

Some simple facts and ordinary routines of the Lasallian teachers might interest you:

These Lasallian teachers are men and women, young and old, religious and lay.

They all prepared to be high school teachers, though more

than half of them are teaching at the elementary or college level.

They travel on public transportation, called Jeepneys, for an hour a day.

The Lasallian teacher is held accountable. A supervisor records class activity each period. A teacher might be judged to have an unruly class or one with productive noise. Lesson plans are critiqued weekly.

Teachers wear uniforms, even at the university.

They arrive at school between 7 and 7:30 and are there for 10 hours a day.

Everyone teaches at least one class—the president, the principal, the dean, the academic coordinator, the development officer,...

They teach 3,500 students, from "prep" (five year olds) to university (master's degree students), all on one school site. The property is ten acres of grass with beautiful fruit trees—mangos, bread-fruit, and papaya.

What else did I learn about these Lasallian teachers? Five qualities come to mind.

First, the teachers demonstrate an **obedience** I have known to exist only among religious vocations. The teachers are willing to serve where needed, even outside their own discipline. I found several English majors teaching Christian Living, mathematics, chemistry; physics majors were teaching elementary school science and arithmetic. I asked the elementary teachers how they felt about teaching young children a subject foreign to their own training. Without exception they described their positions positively. "They need me here," a young English major explained. "I think I was given a second grade Christian Living class because I have a nurturing instinct and am open, flexible, and a fast learner."

A sixty year old English professor who was teaching psychology said: "Anyone who stops learning is old: anyone who keeps learning is young."

This was a lesson to me, as I had been very concerned about my assignment to work with teachers outside my areas of expertise. I tried to have the assignment changed several times by FAX messages before leaving home. I was troubled because the work spanned all age levels and paired me with teachers of chemistry, physics, philosophy, history, home economics, computing, Christian Living, and mathematics. I was promised only two days with people in my own field of educational psychology and teacher preparation.

When I came to accept my assignments, I found them rejuvenating.

Second, the Lasallian teachers are **disciplined and efficient**.

After thirty-five one-hour classroom observations, from prep school to university, I can think of no teacher who was unprepared to teach his or her students. Of course, some teachers were more interesting, more creative, and more engaging than others.

Teachers wanted their students to demonstrate high achievement on the quarterly examinations. Honors assemblies follow these examinations making public the accomplishments of both the teachers and the students. It is expected that those who do well will go on to serve the church, the city and the country as leaders.

It was of course the unmotivated students who challenged the teachers.

Third, the Lasallian teachers are **dedicated**.

Teachers in Bacolod began their day together in teacher workrooms where the walls are lined with fifteen to twenty desk-like carrels, one for each teacher. As the first bell

sounded, the teachers were off with a box of chalk, a lesson plan book, and perhaps a roll of newsprint. They moved from class to class five or six times a day, across disciplines and across age-groups. During our conference discussions, teachers described their days as full and meaningful.

After-school hours were spent tutoring students, advising drama, astronomy, sports and scouting clubs. Some departmental meetings and lesson preparation were sandwiched into this student-centered schedule. It was not uncommon for a teacher to return on Saturdays to support student activity.

One might assume that these dedicated folk were without home responsibilities. Every teacher I met had family obligations. Many were assisting their parents in supporting siblings; others had their own children, while the Christian Brothers lived on campus quite accessible to the family of the student body.

I asked them to tell me about materials and resources that might enhance instruction; teachers rarely wanted anything. They were satisfied with colored chalk, access to an overhead projector, and several pieces of newsprint. These teachers said that resource guides might extend mathematics and science instruction. One requested dissecting kits.

Because many of these teachers attended public schools before earning their college degree at the Brothers' university in Bacolod, they knew of their distinct advantage over Bacolod public school teachers whose students had no textbooks or materials. Teachers' lectures were copied into composition books by the students.

My fourth observation is that Lasallian teachers are **charitable**.

Every teacher I came to know gave financial support for education either to younger brothers and sisters or to his or her own children. Experienced teachers helped new faculty. Staff, older students, and parents all gave time and money for improving the educational programs and general support of the poor.

Finally, Lasallian teachers are **joyful**.

They smiled, were cheerful and spirited, even on Friday afternoons!

How are these educators able to be joyful when they taught more than forty students a period, had access to so few instructional materials, earned very modest incomes, and were held so highly accountable? It is my belief that the strong COMMUNITY energized them to practice obedience, be disciplined and effective, dedicated, charitable, and joyful.

Community was the enabler. The longer I was there, the more worthwhile I felt, the more I was in touch with Christianity as a living truth, the more I understood the force behind the tremendous productivity and spirit of these Lasallian teachers. Community seemed to be the scaffolding which kept the visions of St. La Salle alive in so many teachers of different backgrounds. Community is necessary, I concluded, in order for us as teachers to embrace fully the vocation of teaching.

The community reflected the Lasallian spirit—the spirit of a man who chose to teach the poor, who founded the first normal school for teacher education, who challenged delinquent youth to become productive, and who inspired a group of men to dedicate their lives to the education of the minds and souls of youth. Many teachers in the Philippines have formalized their commitment to the Lasallian tradition by

joining **SIGNUM FIDEI**. This is a group of teachers who volunteer to study La Salle's life and spend time in prayer and retreat with the Brothers.

The Brothers have said, "The Brothers may come and go, but the lay teachers often stay and are at the heart of the school."

In our farewell ceremony, students danced, sang, played the piano and spoke. The student body president demonstrated his commitment to teachers and teaching by delivering a message called *The Teacher's Prayer*, by Glenn Frank. I will share an abbreviated form of this prayer with you.

O Lord of learning and learners, we are at best but blunderers in the godlike business of teaching.

Our shortcomings shame us, for we are not alone in paying the penalty for them; they have a sorry immortality in the minds of those whom we, in our blundering, mislead.

It is easier to tell our students about the motionless past that we can learn once and for all than to join with them in trying to understand the moving present that must be studied afresh each morning.

Help us to say "do" more often than saying "don't."

Help us to realize that, in the deepest sense, we cannot teach anybody anything; that the best we can do is help him to learn for himself.

Help us to see that education is, after all, but the adventure of trying to make ourselves at home in the modern world.

May we be shepherds of the Spirit as well as masters of the mind. Give us, O Lord of teachers, a sense of divinity in our undertaking. Amen.

Finally, I will end with excerpts from a letter I received the day before I left the school. The teacher writes:

I would like to thank God for affirming the gifts and graces He gives me through you. There are times when I'm questioning and challenging my teacher ministry—whether it is both as efficient and as effective as St. John Baptist de La Salle wanted it to be. In his words:

1) "Consider how important it is for you to use your time well. To do so you must live in an orderly and systematic fashion." (Efficiency)

2) "Winning (touching) the hearts of your pupils is one of the principal means of teaching them to live as Christians." (Effectiveness)

Our ministry is not easy—for "a teacher teaches what a teacher is."

We are not just teaching concepts and ideas but our very own personhood, and ultimately Christ should be visible in our lives.

Faternally,

(signed)

I am home now with a new found zeal, a commitment to, and an emotion for building community here at St. Mary's College that will enable us to reflect more fully the spirit and vision of our founder, St. John Baptist de La Salle.

As I said in my farewell remarks in the Philippines, I was sent on a "Mission of Service," but what I found was that I needed them more than they needed me.

Salamat Gid! Thank you very much. ●