

CHARACTERISTICS OF LASALLIAN SCHOOLS

— ASSOCIATION —

As we have worked with this document on the Lasallian vision, we have been struck by the quality of Association in our own educational backgrounds. Somewhere in that diversity and variety of curriculum, and myriad of educators was a unified vision which made all difficulties and shortcomings insignificant beside the greater value of the individual's personal, spiritual, and professional development.

In his writings, La Salle refers to Union in a community as a precious gem. He states that if you wish your community to continue, you must cherish and preserve this virtue.

La Salle's point professes the essential meaning, purpose and strength of the Lasallian school.

Attainment of this union in community and its nourishment and preservation is critical to that which distinguishes and defines the successful and productive Catholic school.

In light of this, please consider the following scenarios, created to provide example, as to how they each fulfill, or fail to fulfill, the Lasallian ideal of Association in the school.

Consider a "basketball coach", in his mid-thirties. He spends long hours practicing whenever he can squeeze gym time from the flea markets and dances that invade the facility. Coaches, generally, are paid poorly. He is paid less than that. Yet he works, year after year, driving, chiding, teasing, scolding, and elevating his team in perfecting their play in the game of basketball. He absolutely knows the kids on his team. He knows how they are doing in the classroom, how they feel at home, and how they are with their friends. The school he coaches for would never want another coach.

What about the case of the "first year teacher" in his first classroom. A nun, with years of experience, takes him under her wing, advising, helping, comforting, and inspiring him in managing the classroom, and reaching his students.

A group of "lay teachers" banded together as a Union challenge the religious administration on salary, benefits, work conditions. Both the administration and bargaining group begin all conversation with the word "Demands."

Consider an "English teacher" just completing her third year of teaching in a Lasallian School. She questions her next contract. The school makes a commitment to her in offering tenure. What kind of commitment has she made and is she going to make to the school?

"A Brother Principal" of some experience is given a new assignment. He arrives to find his administrative team a mix of religious and lay individuals of obvious professional competence. He is uneasy with the team and tends to become a narrow autocrat in his role.

Review for consideration a new teacher, with "outstanding academic training", who professes witness to Gospel values as evidenced by their work in the community, but who is also as yet uncertified. Both a department chairperson and academic principal encourage that teacher to pursue greater professional qualifications.

What about the "established master moderator" of an excellent program, who never yields to a possible greater good. "Oh, you need to take class pictures... take them during the Religion classes, they won't mind."

Consider situations like a "non-practicing catholic" teacher, with a heavy class load and coaching duties, who experiences a personal family crisis, the loss of a loved one. The staff in his Lasallian school rallies around him, covering his classes, his coaching duties, supporting him emotionally through his hardship.

And, finally, what about an extremely competent teacher who, in "subtle ways", sets himself apart from the presence of the spiritual dimension of the school. He regularly sees to handing out his mimeographed papers for class while a prayer to begin the day is being read over the public address system.

"Ministers of grace" — what an honor — what an ennobling of our vocation. St. John Baptiste de La Salle, the Patron of all Christian teachers, was a pioneer in recognizing the special dignity of the teacher.

This was very simple to St. La Salle — Ministers of Grace should "work in UNION, in a spirit of charity, tolerance, patience, humor and humility." With a shared acceptance of Gospel values, they should strive to relate as Jesus did with the Apostles — as the early Christians did in their experience of community.

Having Jesus' prayer at the Last Supper in mind, St. La Salle referred to unity as a "precious gem"! God knows how often we aspire to the ideal of union — and how often we fail! Consider St. La Salle's meditation for the 12th Sunday after Pentecost: "In fact, a community where charity and union are lacking, is a 'species of hell'. Here one complains, there another raises his voices against his brother

on account of some grievance; a third is angry because someone has annoyed him; a fourth denounces his brother to his superior for what he has done to him. Nothing but complaints, murmuring and backbiting is to be heard, causing great trouble and disquietude. The only remedy to such disorders is union and charity."

It is consoling to realize that even the brothers in community with St. John experienced some of the same problems we face today.

In our secular society, charity and union, at times, seem remote and idealistic. We are influenced by the prophets of the ME-GENERATION, to get ahead at all costs. We find ourselves concentrating on the development of our own interests, in isolation, with little regard for unity, charity or the development of a WE-GENERATION.

The so-called "master moderator", immersed in his all important program, seeking his own aggrandizement, while oblivious to the work and needs of his colleagues — or to the goals of the school, does little to promote a spirit of union and charity.

"Lay negotiation teams make their demands as they pursue their interests using a completely secular process. Only conflict can ensue when such a team locks horns with an unyielding, unrealistic "board of control". How much better it would be if both sides strove to view the process as an "act of christian justice" —the TEAM realizing the financial constraints of the school and the BOARD being realistic and sensitive to the actual cost of living.

The ideal of Lasallian Association can be distorted by an "all-knowing, authoritarian Principal — oblivious to the expertise of his colleagues— doing things the way he's always done them in obstinate isolation. Such an administrator will have great difficulty adapting to a collegial style.

In our attempts to "rise from a species of hell" —to approach our Association with charity, patience and tolerance, we have developed in-service programs in spirituality and retreats. We discuss the scriptures, pray together and celebrate liturgies. We support one another in times of crises —in much the same way depicted in the scenario of the man who lost a loved one, and at times of joy — professions, weddings, baptisms, etc. We have been quite successful in creating the caring environment which has become the trademark of any good Catholic school.

Most of us have been fortunate enough to have experienced the good nature of a veteran teacher —like the supportive NUN— who took the time to help a novice teacher adjust and develop professionally. I can remember the concern and kindness of Brother Henry Mischuk who took me under his wing and helped me survive my first year at CBA. People like these nourish and sustain us both professionally and spiritually.

However, Lasallian ASSOCIATION requires more!

The outward manifestations of our concern for one another must be motivated, not by the desire to ameliorate our position in the community, but by an interior heartfelt commitment to Gospel Values. It is possible to fake a commitment —to render lip service to the ideal— to be a modern pharisee.

Contrast the epitome of the Minister of Grace depicted as the "basketball coach" to that of the "secular professional". The Secular Professional who views his position

only in terms of academic subject matter, good position, comfortable life style and job security does little to promote the Lasallian character of the school.

In his address to the Brothers at the General Chapter in Rome, last spring, Pope John Paul II, stated that: "The Christian Educational Plan must be carried out by everyone". And cautioned that: "It can so happen that administrators, with the respect and justice imposed upon them, are led to help such or such a teacher to voluntarily withdraw from a contract which he cannot integrally assume."

This approach should certainly influence our hiring practices. In fact, the article entitled, "Religion Teacher Hiring Interview" presented as a project at the St. Mary's Press Workshop in July/86 stresses the importance of selecting teachers who will be receptive to Lasallian Ideals. The well-qualified student depicted poses the dilemma: Do we hire someone lacking a teacher's license who will be receptive to the school's philosophy or a credentialed individual like the "secular professional"?

The "English teacher granted tenure", having the school's affirmation, faces the future contemplating whether she can integrally assume the responsibilities imposed by working in a Lasallian school as a Minister of Grace.

We are Ministers of Grace in Association.

It is my hope that what we have shared here today in our discussions will be more than an intellectual exercise or a three-day holiday — that what we discuss today will motivate, animate a new spirit in our schools. This is just the first step — we have much to do!

In closing, may I suggest the following for your consideration. Fully realizing their idealistic nature:

1. That a person's ability to be receptive to Gospel values and the teachings of St. La Salle be a criteria in the selection of new teachers.
2. That Lasallian ideals be infused into the orientation of new faculty.
3. That faculty members be expected to participate in programs designed to explain the Lasallian character of the school.
4. That administrators be bold enough to realize the incapability of certain faculty members to fulfill a contract infused with Lasallian Value —and act accordingly.
5. That we investigate, possibly at the district level the development of a model for a collegial style of administration.
6. That the Brothers realize the growing need to be the animators of Lasallian spirituality, and:
7. That their lay colleagues, realizing their special status as Ministers of Grace assume a more active role in the propagation of the spirit of La Salle.

LET US REMEMBER:

"Union in a Community is truly a precious gem. When this is lost, all is lost. Hence, if you wish your Community to continue, preserve this virtue carefully!"

Peter Santanello and George Linke.