

# **"LEADING THE YOUNG ON THE PATH OF SALVATION": A PERSONAL REFLECTION ON THE SPIRITUALITY OF TEACHING**

**by Nicholas Hutchinson, FSC**

"Well, what's it all about, then?" asked a taxi driver of his fare, whom he knew to be the philosopher, Bertrand Russell. "And, do you know," the driver later reported, "he couldn't tell me!" 'Spirituality' might be considered as the framework that helps us to 'make some sense' of life and respond to challenges we face - and particularly to make some sense of what happens to us as individuals. The process, then, of developing values, attitudes and skills is at the heart of education and contributes towards a search for 'meaning'. It is not a matter of expecting to be able to find definitive 'answers'; rather, an 'education in spirituality' includes the process of gaining insights, glimpses and pointers that help us to determine the approach to take in life and to make some kind of sense of what happens to us.

At its most complete, of course, spirituality is incarnational: a wholesome and holistic attitude to life, based on the lived experience that "God so loved the world" that he sent his Son to live fully as one of us (Jn 316). What 'impact' does this actually have for me? How does my experience and knowledge and understanding of Jesus - fully God and fully human - impinge on my attitude and behaviour in daily life?

The spirituality reflected in 'The Little Way' of St Thérèse of Lisieux has touched many with its simplicity of a sense of the sanctity of the present moment, and the transformation of the 'ordinary'. 'Celtic spirituality' alerts us to how wafer-thin is any 'boundary' between the divine and the human, and between what some might distinguish as being either 'sacred' or 'secular'. We can discover that everything is interwoven with God's Presence.

## **'Seeing salvation', and Lasallian spirituality**

Culminating on Easter Sunday 2000, BBC2 broadcast a wonderful series entitled 'Seeing Salvation', based on the exhibition at London's National Gallery, 'Seeing Salvation: the Image of Christ'. The title stems from the Song of Simeon (Lk 229-32) which is prayed as he takes the infant Jesus in his arms, realising that Jesus is the fulfilment of the promise made to him that he would discover the One who brings salvation. About 1669 (and, in the Lasallian time-frame, De La Salle was then aged 18) Rembrandt painted Simeon as having his eyes closed, reminding us that it is an inner vision that leads each of us to recognise Jesus in our midst - and most especially to see that those we accompany are "the living images of Jesus Christ". Rembrandt's painting of 'Simeon and the Child Jesus in the Temple' is of eyes and inner vision, of a weak body and a strong faith, of demise and birth, of fulfilment and potential.

Rembrandt, with over 400 paintings of biblical scenes to his name, uses qualities of light and colour to draw attention to God's Presence in the life of the person being depicted, and God's Presence is, indeed, a brilliant light that leads to self-revelation and true vision. In 1888 Vincent Van Gogh wrote to his brother, Theo: "I want to paint men and women with that something of the eternal which the halo used to symbolise, which I seek to convey by the radiance and vibration of my colouring." Are we as aware as these two artists seem to be of the effects of the Presence of God in people - and, in our particular circumstances, in those to whom we minister and who share our lives? John Baptist De La Salle remarks that "in the light of faith you see things quite differently", and he urges the teachers to pause regularly throughout the day so that, with their students, they can - together - remind themselves of God's Presence. That which we call 'Lasallian spirituality', then, stems from a growing awareness of the Presence of God. Not least of the effects is a developing 'way of looking at things'.

John Baptist De La Salle calls educators to express a quality of caring: "Take even more care of the young people than if they were the children of a king". Know that "God gives you the power to perform miracles by touching the hearts of those entrusted to your care". "Do you build on the affection the young people

have for you to draw them to God, leading them on the path of salvation?" Accordingly, a hallmark in many Lasallian (as well as other) schools is (or should be) a focus of great respect for individuals, knowing that, in a very down-to-earth way, we are "seeing with the eyes of faith". In inviting people to respect the individuality of each, it may be helpful to pray: "Lord, teach me to see and love in others what you see and love in them". This quality of Christian care and respect for each individual is mentioned on websites and in prospectuses of some Lasallian schools.

## **Being awakened and challenged**

Skills of 'how to look and gain insights' are explored in the books of Sister Wendy Beckett: skills that can be of help in 'making sense of life'. She writes that "Great art offers more than pleasure; it offers the pain of spiritual growth, drawing us into areas of ourselves that we may not wish to encounter. It will not leave us in our mental or moral laziness. It is not just that we are privileged to see the world through the insight of a genius - great though that experience is - but that the painter's insights awaken and challenge us, and we end up changed." "Awakening and challenging" is integral to 'education in spirituality', and it is little wonder that Sister Wendy adds that "Art is one way of listening to God".

Young people can also be 'awakened and challenged' by being encouraged to ask deep questions of themselves and of others. Films like Kevin Costner's 'Field of Dreams', and 'Picnic at Hanging Rock', and 'The Sixth Sense' can lead older students to appreciate that the obvious questions being asked are, in fact, peripheral: we are called to look further and explore deeper questions. "Try to love the questions themselves," remarks Rainer Maria Rilke, of the deeper matters in life. If such questioning - and therefore awareness - does not remain part of our 'make-up' and that of our students, then ours repeatedly will be the sentiment of T.S. Eliot, that "we had the experience but missed the meaning".

## **'Really seeing' and 'wonder and awe'**

Part of the extensive new 'Prayer and Education Website' of the De La Salle Brothers - [www.prayingeachday.org](http://www.prayingeachday.org) - includes pictures of contemporary scenes, and the overview of the month of October shows a tree in autumnal colours, with this calling to mind of God's Presence:

"This day, Father, may my eyes be opened to see the beauty in all that is ordinary - yet special - around me. May the glory of all that you have made remind me of your presence, and lead me closer to you."

Albert Einstein wrote: "Whoever is devoid of the capacity to wonder, whoever remains unmoved, whoever cannot contemplate or know the deep shudder of the soul in enchantment, might just as well be dead - for he has already closed his eyes upon life." In this context the biblical - and educational - exhortation to "choose life and not death" (Deut 30.19) is particularly poignant, and we can reflect on the promotion of all that is 'of life', and all that is life-giving. "I see wonderful things" said Howard Carter on first peering into the tomb of Tutankhamen, and D. H. Lawrence talked of "the sense of wonder: that is the sixth sense, and it is the natural religious sense". Each of us might think of how, as educators, we have helped to promote a sense of wonder and awe.

## **The need for formative religious experiences**

I was told recently of some children progressing through their primary school, having formed a habit together of relaxing, meditating and praying (when the time and circumstances have been appropriate). I would argue that we are doing a dis-service to the young if we do not invite them to 'see' and be aware, to awaken and question and be challenged, and to reflect and meditate and pray. It is a warm and life-giving experience to "sow seed" by "building on the affection the young people have for you... to lead them on the path

of salvation".<sup>11</sup> This and several of the themes touched upon throughout this article are reflected in a wonderful (but little known) painting, 'The Childhood of Christ', by Gerrit van Honthorst.

When I was a 12-year-old, I remember our class being led in a skilful way through a musical score that accompanied a record of Prokofiev's 'Peter and the Wolf'. That single experience opened up a whole new world for me. The theologian, Hans Küng, wrote about Mozart's Clarinet Concerto (appreciated by many in the film, 'Out of Africa'): 'To listen to the adagio of the Clarinet Concerto, is to perceive something wholly 'other': the sound of an infinite which transcends us, and for which 'beauty' is no description'. G. W. Hegel observes that "the beautiful is the spiritual making itself known through the senses".

I remain convinced of the need to rediscover silence as that which can 'enable'. As silence reaches the inner self we can convey openness and a willingness to listen and to 'be' (rather than necessarily to 'do' or 'be occupied'), and we are the more likely to grow 'reverent', in the widest sense of the term. And so there are times when silence can be the pre-requisite for something to happen. If we give ourselves 'time and space' and attune ourselves to silence, we can also discover 'special places'. The beauty and the serenity of many special places and occasions have been 'captured' by artists and photographers. In every sense, "grace builds on nature", as St Augustine records, and we can be led to discover "how awe-inspiring this place is; truly God is here and I never knew it!" (Gen 28:16). At these times we discover anew the interweaving of God's Presence throughout the ordinariness of daily life.

Choosing the appropriate time, it can be an amazing exercise for teenagers to sit on a hillside in silence on a summer's day, and write about what they experience through their own senses and in other ways. Another formative experience is to spend time looking up at a sky resplendent with stars. Some schools make use of websites that display birds in the wild that can be identified with accompanying birdsong. Such experiences can contribute to an all-encompassing sense of reverence.

A friend told me of hearing a young Maori recite with pride a poem in rhythm and deep tones, and how that experience was for her a step in understanding and respecting other peoples and cultures. Such formative experiences also contribute to a holistic approach to life, which is not always the reality of people of the West, pointing all the more to the growth in understanding and perspective that can be achieved through the study of the culture, religion and philosophy of other peoples: achievable at various ages through most of the subjects of the school curriculum.

It was a profound experience when someone first led me through the meditation, 'The Statue', by Anthony de Mello, through which we can come to see ourselves as Jesus might see us. In prayer we might use the imagination to help place self in God's presence e.g. by placing a chair a few feet away, and thinking of Jesus being physically present in it. It can then be a revealing follow-up 'exercise' to reflect on what we envisage the body language and the expression on the face of Jesus to have been!

An essential element in accompanying others on "the path of salvation" is the sharing of 'story', which can reflect hopes and dreams, sorrows and anxieties. The 'story' to be shared is not only that of others (and from various cultures) but, in the right way and at the right time, of self - and this can have a profound effect in "touching the hearts of those entrusted to our care, and leading them on the path of salvation". Kahlil Gibran remarks that "It is only when you give of yourself that you truly give". Knowing something of the 'story', for example, of the author of the section on prayer in 'The Catechism of the Catholic Church', the words then appear even more clear and credible. It was not from any lofty towers that the priest wrote, but from daily life in the heart of Beirut at the time of persistent killing, bombing and utter destruction. To help in praying from the reality of our own circumstances, the new website of the Brothers includes a reflection (or 'story') and prayer for each day of the year, based on the anniversary of an event or discovery, a birth or death.

## **"Becoming more human"**

This is a very touching letter from a headteacher, given each year to new teachers in her school in Boston in the USA:

"Dear Teacher, I am the victim of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no-one should witness: gas chambers built by learned engineers, children poisoned by educated physicians, infants killed by trained nurses, women and babies shot and burned by high school and college graduates. So, I am suspicious of education. My request is: help your students become human. Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmanns. Reading, writing and arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more human."

Let us pause to consider how - in each and every subject of the school curriculum - wonder and awe, and awareness and appreciation can be stimulated. How can justice and responsibility be promoted, and how can each subject help to "make our young people more human"? Are we building formative (and 'spiritual') experiences into our delivery of the curriculum?

## **Compassion and serving others**

The educator's is a spirituality that includes the acceptance of others as they are: accepting each individual as he or she is, acknowledging and being sensitive to the reality of that individual's circumstances. That reality is often of loneliness (despite what may be a well-disguised exterior to the contrary), reflecting the statement of Thoreau that "the mass of people lead lives of quiet desperation". It is very touching and is still very relevant today to ponder the words of De La Salle (from three centuries ago) that "it often happens that the young people have not the strength of body or mind to carry the burdens that often crush them". Integral to Lasallian education over the years has been, not only the sensitising to matters of justice, but a specific commitment of service from people of all ages to one another in the school community and in local and global communities, knowing, too, that community is built as people take to heart the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7). Such commitment of service and community involves, too, the ministry of healing and, through compassion, healing can also take place in those who are ministering to others because "the God whom we worship is the God of compassion who took our griefs upon himself in Christ.... God, in Christ, meets us in all our pain and suffering."

## **Making connections and retaining perspective**

On various levels it is good for young people to cultivate the habit of pausing towards the end of their day to reflect on what has passed. Pausing in this way (as also with the Lasallian practice of 'remembering God's Presence') can help promote a spirit of thankfulness. Whatever our personal circumstances we can join in prayer each evening with the poet, E. E. Cummings, in saying: "i thank you God for most this amazing day", knowing that, in further words of the poem, "the ears of my ears awake and now the eyes of my eyes are opened".

On the new 'Prayer and Education Website' the overview page for the month of June has a picture looking over fields to hills on the horizon, accompanied by this prayer:

"May my horizon this day, Lord, not be so foreshortened that I notice little. Instead, open my eyes that I may see afar and above as well as in front and beneath me. Lead me to keep my life in perspective and balance and discover that the thread of your presence is interwoven through the events and people of this day."