

Developing Spirituality in a School: Conclusions from The LACE Weekend, May 2001

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Following Brother Bill Mann's input on the spirituality of St John Baptist de La Salle, Patron Saint of Teachers, eight discussion groups were formed, to reflect on what had struck them as most significant and relevant as educators today. The groups were chosen according to interests and they reflected a range of educational experiences and areas of pastoral care. The feedback was exceedingly rich and varied. What follows is an attempt to draw together the principal themes.

We are convinced that the focus of the educational process lies in the development of an awareness of God's presence on the part of the teachers and chaplains themselves, and enabling young people to discover it themselves. The thrust of our ministry is both bi-focal, serving God and young people, and uni-focal, serving God whose presence we recognise within each of our students.

Various scripture-based images were invoked as ways of encapsulating the sense of our ministry of serving young people as educators:- John the Baptist, Ambassadors of Christ, Guardian Angels, Prophets, Shepherds, and Gardeners. In all of these, the action of the Spirit of God is the driving force. It is striking just how many of these images are also used by St John Baptist de La Salle in his Meditations.

We recognise our own dignity and that of our young people. We recognise that our ministry is overwhelmingly pupil-centred, though this is often challenged by many of the "initiatives" forced on us today. The mark of a genuine Christian educator today consists in being committed to knowing young people as individuals, from whatever background they come, whether they are able or have special needs, whether their behaviour is "challenging" or not. This is the modern day equivalent of the tradition of Lasallian the schools being for the poor but open to all.

Much of this type of ministry involves knowing the names and aspirations of students, knowing their needs and their strengths. This necessitates being willing to give quality time to students. Ironically, this can be described as "wasting time" with them in corridors and out of class, enabling them to share, to identify their difficulties and to discover new ways of coping, by our willingness to welcome, listen, affirm, and celebrate with them their recognition of God's presence in their lives. We must be able to "touch their hearts" in class time and in contacts outside of the classroom, encouraging them to try their best, raising their expectations and to practice becoming the best they can. Besides facilitating students through this ministry of spiritual and human development, we are required even more urgently to be role models, individually and collectively.

Several groups remarked on our need to match our thinking with the way we act in all the relationships which we have in our educational settings.

- How do we support our adult colleagues in their efforts to develop?
- How do we share our "good practice" with each other for the benefit of all our students?
- Do we project positive attitudes about ourselves and about others? For example do we smile; or celebrate the variety of gifts and abilities amongst us?
- Do we develop a sense of humour?
- Do we renew ourselves spiritually and socially by praying together by celebrating with each other?

The ministry of educators requires collaboration at many different levels:- between staff and staff, between staff and students, and between parents and governors and chaplains as well. Clearly, these relationships need to develop structures, policies, processes which explicitly value and support persons, which overtly address the spiritual dimensions of life as well as the academic, and which offer correction again and again and again rather than punishment. Looking at alternative ways of schooling, adapted to the needs of real student should be a priority for all involved in a Christian school community .

Offering time for reflection for staff and students was seen as a critical component of a Christian school. This includes short moments of reflection during lessons as well as scheduled times of retreat and liturgies through the year. Governors and staff need to conspire to provide a welcoming environment for our students, offering them well decorated, attractive and changing settings, which recognise and celebrate their dignity as images of the living God. One very simple practical rule of thumb, for use at assemblies, briefings or talking with groups in school, was the "four to one" ratio of affirmations or praise to complaints or criticism.

Mentoring and peer ministries among students are a modern day equivalent to De La Salle's efforts to promote student responsibility . It was felt that chaplains in today's schools meet a particular need in supporting the community aspect of the school. Their role involves advocacy for justice, appreciation and affirmation of everyone involved in the community. This role is increasingly seen as important in the face of the pressures on educational establishments in our modern world.

It stuck me very forcibly that the conclusions and recommendations arrived at by the groups followed very closely De La Salle's own method of approaching spirituality. Teachers were reflecting on their actual experience of educational ministry, in the light of the Scriptures, working "together and by association" with others involved in the same ministry , sharing their sources of spirituality and its practical outcomes in their ministry. Far from expressing pious idealism, I believe that the views, which I heard and which I have attempted to summarise here, are authentic contemporary expressions of the spirituality , vocation and ministry of Christian educators. The whole process of the workshop underlined for me the appropriateness of St. John Baptist de La Salle being a patron saint for teachers, even in the 21st century . The core of his insights into the vocation of a Christian educator are found in his Mediations for the Time of the Retreat.