

THE GOSPEL AND THE SCHOOL

*(Lasallian) institutions are characterized . . .
by an explicit proclamation of Jesus Christ. (R 13)*

PRELUDE

2.20 *“ . . . I am convinced that too often we have been satisfied and perhaps too easily satisfied today when we have created excellent academic, professional, technical, or agricultural institutions, whether the level is primary, secondary or tertiary. Even if these institutions are accessible to lower middle-class and poor youngsters, they cannot be said to be the privileged instrument of Lasallian apostolic ministries if they are not Christian.”* (Brother John Johnston, Pastoral Letter, January 1, 1988)

2.21 The Lasallian school is Christian

As the historical glimpses of earlier sections have indicated, the Lasallian school is unashamedly Christian in its origins and came into being to give a human and Christian education to young people, especially to the poor. It does this to the extent that its organization and its programs are concerned *“to tie together the work of evangelization, or making the Gospel known, with growth in education and culture.”* (D 40.2) In the 1996 Apostolic Exhortation *Consecrated Life*, Pope John Paul II notes that *“the Church has always recognized that education is an essential dimension of her mission,”* and shows how *“educational undertakings permeated by the Gospel spirit of freedom and charity”* not only help young people *“to mature humanly under the action of the Spirit”* but enable the *“community of learning (to) become an experience of grace, where the teaching program contributes to uniting into a harmonious whole the human and the divine, the Gospel and culture, faith and life.”* (No. 96)

2.22 Our students are at very different levels of commitment to faith

It is clear that the young people in the Lasallian schools are in very different situations with regard to Christian faith and its practices. While this is obvious in countries where Christianity is not a major religion, it is increasingly true in many of the traditionally Christian countries. In his Pastoral Letter of January 1, 1994, Brother John Johnston reminded the Brothers of this point in the following words:

“We have in the same school young people who live their faith and others who do not; young people who are Christian but not Catholic; young people who are not Christians, young people who are indifferent and even hostile to organized religion.”

Rather than being surprised by this, the Lasallian teacher sees this as natural to the age and development of students and recognizes the challenge which this presents in terms of the particular needs of each. In some circumstances, this means that the starting point is often in an education to values by a process which requires involvement of all the students. Meeting at this

level of reflection on behavior and the meaning of life through sharing of opinions may well be the necessary first step which disposes someone to reflect more deeply in a personal way on aspects of life which have been too easily dismissed or never previously considered. Sometimes in such circumstances, it is the voice of a fellow student which carries more weight than that of the teacher.

2.23 All of our students have the right to hear the Gospel

Nevertheless, all the young people whom we meet, no matter the diversity of their situations, have the *right* to hear the Good News, the Gospel, the salvation brought by Jesus Christ. The Lasallian school has the duty to offer them this opportunity but this duty is not fulfilled simply by having compulsory religion classes: there must be a whole pastoral program or campus ministry which keeps alive the spiritual life of the school. Youth groups, reflection groups, the opportunities for retreats and such like activities, are indispensable. The Gospel needs to become known because it is taught, lived and celebrated through such traditional practices of Lasallian schools as the recalling of the *Presence of God*, the traditional *Reflection* (sic) and the invocation *“Live Jesus in our hearts!”* The Gospel becomes better known when formal classes enable students to see how Christian beliefs flow out of the life and teaching of Jesus. The social Gospel becomes real when students are helped to take part in service activities in which they learn how to express their faith through deeds. These are the practical means of salvation which the school can help to make available to its students. The *Declaration*, basing itself on the Vatican II *Pastoral Constitution in the World of Today (Gaudium et Spes)* (57, 4), encourages the Brother (and hence the Lasallian educator) *“to find God’s work in whatever he does for the advancement of human civilization and culture”* and presents the following broad perspective:

“To open the mind of the human person to the world and to life, to the wonder and beauty of nature, to the diversity and richness of art, to the conquests of science and technology, to a deep thought and reflection, to the varieties of civilizations, to the joys of friendship and of giving oneself to others; by all these things a human being is led to recognize the Word of God who, before He became flesh in order to save all things and to sum them up in Himself was in the world already as the true light that enlightens everyone.” (D 41, 3)

2.24 We propose, but do not impose

This deep conviction that the Gospel should be made more readily accessible to all students will always respect the personal freedom of each person. A way through this tension between respecting human freedom and the duty of making the Gospel known in a pluralist society can be offered by remembering that *“the sole requisite of pluralism is that we propose, not impose.”* The *Rule* of 1987 in supporting this attitude by encouraging the Brothers to *“take advantage of the right moment and use the appropriate language to speak of Jesus Christ to those to whom they bring their message”* recognizes as well that *“reciprocally, they themselves are open to being evangelized.”* (R 15) This is a profound truth which touches the very nature of faith coming through hearing and through the mutual sharing of faith which is the very basis of catechesis. What is important, especially for all who teach, is the ability to cultivate an attitude of *listening* to students.

2.25 Catechesis or the education of faith

Catechesis is the aiding of nurturing and maturing in faith. It is, in the words of Catechesis in our Time of Pope John Paul II in 1978, *“educating the true disciple of Christ by means of a deeper and more systematic knowledge of the person and the message of our Lord Jesus Christ.”* It is, by its nature, a sharing of faith with particular emphasis on developing a greater knowledge and understanding which is appropriate to the age of those participating. A Lasallian school takes this as its *“principal function”* and provides the staff, the resources, and the organization needed.

It would certainly be a serious mistake if the catechetical programs and activities of the school were reduced to the bare minimum because of other demands of the curriculum. It would also be an abnegation of the whole Lasallian tradition if catechesis were to be envisaged as something which is mainly applicable to junior classes and immediate preparation for sacraments. Above all, the catechetical program is a systematic presentation of the faith in a form which offers all the students the possibility of deepening their faith through the intellectual conviction which better understanding can bring.

But it would be a serious deficiency to limit “the education of faith” to knowledge and understanding since faith must also be developed through action. In his *Pastoral Letter* of January 1, 1994, Brother John Johnston suggests some practical ways in which this “sharing of faith” can take place:

“ . . . that every existing school ‘reach out to the poor around it and respond creatively: literacy programs- in the school or in other centers; teams of volunteer teachers and young people to work with street children; night classes for school drop-outs; Lasallian youth groups to respond to the needs of the sick, the aged, the neglected . . . ” (p.42)

2.26 Receiving the Sacraments

The Lasallian school has many opportunities to offer its students a deeper participation in the sacramental life of the Church. In primary schools, there is the preparation, in cooperation with the parish, for the reception of First Communion and Reconciliation. For many young people, Baptism and Confirmation may be offered through the school. Experience shows that school celebrations, especially of the sacrament of Reconciliation and the active participation in Eucharistic liturgy for which they have carefully prepared, can have great significance for many young people. The Lasallian school, through careful attention to such celebrations, may help to strengthen the faith community of the school.

2.27 The witness given by a community of faith

A *community of faith* proclaims by its very existence the truth which brings it into being and sustains it, i.e., that all the members have received Christian baptism and acknowledge God as Creator, Jesus Christ as their Savior and Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit as sent by Father and Son to bring us to wholeness in God. If this is the “classic” form which merits the description of

community of faith, it is important to note that this is not a group of the “elect” who wish to present themselves as better than others. It is the usual collection of human beings trying to be faithful to the vision which inspires them. This sense of community of faith may be much stronger at some times than at others when some particular happening binds the members more strongly to their faith and to one another. The celebrated text of Pope Paul VI cited in *Evangelization in the Modern World* comes to mind:

“Today people listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if they listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.” (No. 41)

The 1993 General Chapter saw, as an ideal to be pursued, *“that even Lasallian work, when that is possible, favors the birth of a community of faith, a reference group capable of welcoming various persons (Brothers, priests, religious, laity, young people...), who wish to deepen their faith and whose concern it is to proclaim in an explicit way Jesus Christ and to commit themselves to the service of the poor.”* (Circular 435, 5.5) What is important about this notion is that the community of faith is essentially outward looking. It is less concerned to restrict or limit its membership but is more concerned to include all those who can benefit by the grace of the moment to give expression to the faith that is in them. Christians, it has been said, often recognize their imperfect hope and charity but somehow seem to insist that their faith must never be less than complete, thereby forgetting the prayer of the Apostles *“Lord, increase our faith.”*

Moreover, it must always be remembered that the *“faith community”* is not simply a set structure with rigid rules of membership into which people enter by right of their Christian Baptism. The nature of Christian faith is such that it is clearly not exclusively a question of initiation via Baptism nor of knowledge of Christian doctrine which confers membership. The grace which the Christian tradition insists is conferred by Baptism can remain *potential* in those who make no effort to cooperate with it by the usual practices of Christian life. A faith community can be formed *implicitly* by those who act in accordance with the principles of St. Matthew’s Gospel, Chapter 25, in giving to eat, in offering a cup of cold water, in visiting the sick and those in prison. Many have had that experience of an implicit faith community, somehow visible and tangible at those moments when members of the school community gather to celebrate the mystery of life and death, of sickness and suffering among its members. It can be felt in the efforts of those who strive gratuitously for humanitarian reasons to alleviate human suffering in any shape or form. The example of Pope John Paul II praying with other religious leaders at Assisi in 1986 is probably one of the most striking examples in modern times of this ad hoc *faith community* which met to acknowledge the one Lord and Creator in the common prayer for peace.

2.28 Personal witness

There are Lasallian schools operating in countries where government restrictions make formal teaching or practice of religion difficult. In such cases, an important witness value comes from the very presence of the school and the service it offers for human development. The individual teacher’s own integrity is frequently the most important influence on young people. The discussion of topical problems-war, violence, racism, sexuality, AIDS, peace, the environment-can be

an important way of witnessing to truth. The words of the *Declaration*, written to describe the Brother as a catechist, can be applied more widely to all Lasallian teachers who wish to make them their own:

“The Brother (Lasallian educator) reveals the religion of love by giving to the students an idea of what it means to experience a love that is sensitive, virile and unselfish It is not in words or in books that young people meet most forcibly the God who calls them by name, but rather in the person of the Brother (teacher) who catechizes them.” (D 40.5)