An Approach to Lasallian Assessment

To claim membership in a group while not knowing what the group really is and while remaining ignorant of the name given to its members, what this name implies, and the essential duties of membership would seem to be entirely contrary to good sense and sound reason. (The Duties of a Christian to God, 18)

In all my years at Saint Mary’s University two administration initiatives stand out. They are the exploration of the Lasallian identity of the university and the creation of a culture of assessment. I wonder if they are connected; indeed, whether they can or should be connected? There are three origins of these questions. The first is a paper I wrote a couple of years ago on the idea of a Lasallian University. My thesis was that these two terms are in tension with each other. For example, while the Lasallian educational tradition emphasizes the well-being of the student, the university stresses academic rigor. This rigor sometimes takes on an exclusionary hue based on performance data such as ACT scores, which are used to “select” or “exclude” students from admission or programs. On the other hand, the Catholic Lasallian tradition emphasizes the individual dignity of each learner and is fundamentally inclusive.

Second, is my observation that when we speak about assessment we refer to something of the university, the modern secular university. It is connected to academic rigor in a context that is worldly in spirit and secular in content as practiced through higher education in the United States, one dominated by publicly funded institutions. This form of assessment is largely about accountability to terrestrial forms of authority, mostly funding and accrediting authority. I don’t mean to caricature these emphases. Academic assessment is by definition student-centered but it is program-centered as well, in the sense that it is concerned with assessing, examining, tracking student achievement of program goals. Here at Saint Mary’s University we have tended to focus on program
assessment, especially on planning structures. I also don’t mean to say that any of this is bad or inappropriate, only that it does not reflect the fullness of the Catholic Lasallian tradition. My argument is not the abolition of assessment but its expansion. I am simply raising the question that if we are a Lasallian university shouldn’t we be practicing a Lasallian approach to assessment?

The third origin of this very question is the thought and work of John Baptist de La Salle. Would De La Salle approve of program goals? I have no doubt that he would and that he developed many, as we shall see. But what was the Lasallian program? I like to think in terms of the three Rs: reading, writing, and religion. But De La Salle was too much the true heir of the medieval Catholic tradition to treat these three disciplines equally. Rather, they formed a hierarchy and certainly religion was by far the most important. Reading the Meditations for the Time of Retreat, one gets a very clear sense that the Founder, while concerned about the practical learning that could improve the lives of the students, was far more interested in their spiritual well-being. He places the Brothers in loco parentis, and clearly entrusts the salvation of their students to them. In this way De La Salle made teaching both a profession and a vocation. If De La Salle were here I am certain that he would not have the slightest problem with assessing program goals. But I am even more certain that he would ask where is the assessment of the ultimate goal of a Lasallian education: the welfare, the spiritual welfare, indeed the salvation of the individual student? So, we have already reached an important level of clarity, that a Lasallian approach to assessment should seek to assess things that are central to a Lasallian education. But this raises another point we need to clarify, what are those central things?
I can think of three possible answers to this question. The first is that Lasallian assessment would be the assessment of student knowledge of De La Salle, his life, times, work, and the history of the Brothers. This seems to be very much the goal of the Lasallian Core Traditions program and perhaps of the Lasallian Honors program as well. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this essentially historical approach except that it is an insufficient understanding of the profoundly theological meaning of the term “Lasallian.”

A second definition of Lasallian assessment might be the assessment of those transcendent values we mentioned above. Are graduates of Saint Mary’s University qualitatively different and better than graduates of other institutions: secular, religious, Catholic? Are they better human beings, more virtuous, more spiritual, do they love God more, are they saved? This might be the truest definition of Lasallian assessment and ultimately the most unreachable. How is it possible to assess these things except at the end of one’s life and who besides the Almighty has the data? So, is Lasallian assessment possible in the deeper and I think more authentically spiritual sense of the term? Is it possible to monitor the spiritual growth of our students? I would say that I have received very different answers to these questions from a theologian and a director of institutional assessment, and I, personally, am not sure what the answers are.

The third answer, and my method here, is to associate Lasallian assessment with key characteristics of the Lasallian charism. I will derive those characteristics from authentic Lasallian sources. They are the writings of John Baptist de La Salle, official publications of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, and commentaries by Lasallian
scholars, who happen to be themselves Christian Brothers. “Lasallian” can have no meaning unless it is rooted in the thought and work of De La Salle and the Brothers.

The key document for me is a typescript by Brother Luke Salm, Emeritus Professor of Theology at Manhattan College, entitled “Characteristics of Lasallian Schools in the USA.” In it Brother Luke lists six characteristics. Since he makes clear that they are not listed in any particular order, I have rearranged them for my own purposes. My paper, while based on authentic sources, is not authentic. It is simply my own thoughts expressed as much in the form of questions as statements, and for the purpose of promoting discussion among the faculty. My target audience is the undergraduate faculty of Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota, Winona campus. If other constituencies find value in it, so much the better.

I begin with Brother Luke’s characteristic: **commitment, in association, to teaching as a vocation**, for the purpose of clarifying the relationship between “Lasallian” and “assessment.” I am pretty certain that De La Salle never used the term assessment, but he did use several analogous ones. The Brothers themselves went through intense and permanent formation where their religious lives were closely monitored. Novitiate lasted a year but after taking permanent vows the Brothers engaged in formation on several simultaneous levels. The Brothers were required to participate in an annual retreat held at Saint Yon’s. They were required to write a monthly letter on their conduct to the Superior. Each Sunday the Brothers participated in “catechism of formation” where one of them gave a presentation and posed questions on a topic. Reddition was the weekly meeting with one’s Director where the brother’s spiritual direction was examined. The
most dramatic form of evaluation was the “advertisement of defects” where on Friday evenings each Brother invited the others to point out his defects including those as teachers. On a more associative level, once a week the Brothers took a walk where they discussed pedagogy, the more experienced sharing tips with the newer teachers. (Poutet, 73, 111, 112, 118, 120, 121, 122) In the particular cases of Reddition and recreation, it should be pointed that they refer primarily to the religious and spiritual lives of the Brothers. But in both cases De La Salle also refers to the Brothers’ conduct and attitude in the classroom and with regard to students. (De La Salle, Collection of Various Short Treatises, 13-18, 24-29.) De La Salle’s “reddition letters” where he acts as Superior to the Brothers, reflects a similar pattern. (The Letters of John Baptist de La Salle.)

What stands out is that De La Salle makes no distinction between the vocation of teaching and the profession of teaching, between religious formation and what we would call faculty development. This poses a serious challenge for us. In the Tenth Meditation for the Time of Retreat (202.3) De La Salle writes: “Your zeal for the children you instruct would not go very far and would not have much result or success if it limited itself only to words. To make it effective it is necessary that your example support your instructions, and this is one of the main signs of your zeal.” In this way De La Salle connects religious formation and faculty development to sound instruction and student learning. He cites the method of Saint Paul and Jesus himself who taught by example. He concludes in this way, “It is easy to conclude from these examples that your zeal for the children who are under your guidance would be very imperfect if you exercised it only by instructing them; it will only become perfect if you practice yourselves what you
are teaching them. Example makes a much greater impression on the mind and heart than words….”

There are at least two challenges here. The first is the Catholic Lasallian idea that teaching is both a profession and a vocation. The second is that so much of what De La Salle wrote was addressed to the Brothers. If the term “Lasallian” must be rooted in the thought and works of De La Salle, how do we lay teachers read admonitions meant for religious brothers? How do we adapt them to our own lives? More important still, we have come upon one of the most central meanings of “Lasallian,” the unity of the exterior and the interior. Lasallian teachers must both do good teaching and be a good teacher; they must develop effective teaching techniques but most of all teach by example of their inner being. Therefore, this last point involves formation, habituation, virtue, and proper motivation. How does this essentially theological meaning of “Lasallian” help us to conceptualize Lasallian assessment?

One of the most amazing indicators of the understanding of teaching as both vocation and profession is the registers that the Brothers were required to keep on all students. There were six altogether: Admissions Register; Register of the Good and Bad Qualities of Students; Register of Promotions in Lessons; Register of the First Students in the Bench; Register of Levels in Lessons; Register of Home Visitations. (The Conduct of the Christian Schools, 39 hereafter, Conduct) In modern terms these registers are collections of data. They include personal and family data, data of personal qualities, academic progress, absences and tardies. The penultimate is a compilation of various data, so that the teacher and the Inspector of Schools had a full picture of each child’s performance. This is the clearest evidence we have that a Lasallian approach to
assessment is holistic and consists of program goals, but also data on individual students, and their character, moral life, or if you prefer their dispositions.

There is a great deal of emphasis on inspection and correction of students in *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*. De La Salle devoted an entire chapter to correction, which he began by writing, “The correction of students is one of the most important things to be done in the schools.” (*Conduct*, 135) The rest of the book is also filled with references to inspection and correction, particularly the section on writing, where he states that teachers must inspect the writing of each student every day, and in the case of beginners twice or three times a day. (*Conduct*, 82) Finally, in the very first paragraph of the *Conduct* De La Salle writes:

> Nothing has been added that has not been thoroughly deliberated and well tested, nothing of which the advantages and disadvantages have not been weighed and, as far as possible, of which the good or bad consequences have not been foreseen.” (*Conduct*, 45).

My argument is that although De La Salle probably never used the word assessment, his emphasis on formation; faculty development; inspection, correction, and evaluation of students; and data collection comes very close to modern assessment methods. In the quotation just cited one can clearly see a sophisticated process of assessment: the development and implementation of pedagogical techniques, testing and data collection, and a closing of the loop by accepting or rejecting programs and techniques based on actual experience. The point is well made: assessment has been a hallmark of the Christian Schools from the very beginning. But to this we must add that the principles of association and vocation are fundamental to any understanding of the term Lasallian. The first provides a strong impetus towards inclusion and strong relationships between teachers, between students, between teachers and students, and between teachers and
student’s parents. The second promotes a strong sense of calling and therefore of still another relationship between the teacher and God. Obviously, then, Lasallian assessment must be fundamentally relational and inclusive. It therefore must contain a significant qualitative component and a willingness to probe the interior life, the dispositions, of both teacher and student. In sum, Lasallian assessment is much more holistic, much more respectful of the whole human person than secular, academic assessment is, as practiced in the United States.

We are left with the following questions: Do we have a consciously Lasallian approach to assessment? Do we assess specifically Lasallian values and principles such as holism, association, and vocation? Is the tendency to separate and to compartmentalize a symptom of secularism? On the other hand, does the Catholic Lasallian tradition tend to organize diversity within unity? Do we practice this? To what extent can the interior, dispositional lives of students and teachers be assessed and should they?

I would like to take the next two characteristics together. They are the importance given to religious education and an emphasis on the practical in the Christian Schools. To be blunt: there is nothing original or distinctive in Lasallian schools in emphasizing religion within Catholic education. In a previous paper I identified De La Salle as typical of the Catholic Reformation. Indeed, there is nothing more central to both the Protestant and Catholic Reformations than the recognition that the people were very poorly informed about Christian doctrine and that the churches have a fundamental obligation to instruct properly. I also cited some of the efforts to improve religious education that preceded De La Salle. So, the distinguishing feature of the
Lasallian school is not so much its emphasis on religious education per se, but its recognition of the unity of the sacred and the profane. This can be seen in a number of ways.

Much of seventeenth-century Catholic education was catechetical. De La Salle clearly intended Christian schools to go beyond catechetics. The typical schoolday was spent first in prayer, then studying the profane subjects of reading, writing, arithmetic, and spelling, followed by Mass, and then more work on the secular subjects, before concluding with the catechism lesson. De La Salle himself wrote books on both secular and sacred subjects. They include how to pray properly at Mass, how to make a good confession and to prepare for reception of Communion, a catechism, but also a syllabary and The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility. This last document, often referred to as a treatise on politeness, is an extraordinary document that well illustrates the unique Lasallian emphasis on the unity of the secular and the sacred. In the Preface De La Salle wrote:

> It is surprising that most Christians look upon good decorum and politeness as merely human and worldly qualities and do not think of raising their minds to any higher views by considering them as virtues that have reference to God, to their neighbor, and to themselves. This illustrates very well how little true Christianity is found in the world, and how few among those who live in the world are guided by the Spirit of Jesus Christ. (*The Rules of Christian Decorum*, 3)

De La Salle divides the treatise into two parts: decorum and civility. The first is essentially moral, it arises from the individual’s dedication to wise and well-regulated conduct. Civility, on the other hand, has a social dimension, it is rooted in love of neighbor. (*The Rules of Christian Decorum*, 4) The third component of De La Salle’s thought is motivation. He writes in the *Duties of a Christian*:
We call the ordinary virtues moral virtues because they regulate our conduct. Heretics and infidels, as well as true Christians, can practice virtues of this sort, at least exteriorly. If these virtues are special to us Christians, it is only insofar as we practice them, accompanied by grace under the movement of God’s Spirit and with a pure intention of pleasing him. (The Duties of a Christian to God, 21)

Morality, social responsibility, and true Christian motivation, which is interior, are the keys to the Founder’s thinking on religious education. As such, education in the Christian Schools is eminently practical because it understands that the students will live in the world. Therefore, it respects the autonomy of the secular, and of the social and professional, and the usefulness of good taste. Today this practicality often deteriorates into the anti-intellectual, which is unfortunate, because De La Salle always places his practicality in an intellectual context, always a Christian one.

Speaking of the practical, how do these characteristics help us to understand that to be Lasallian is to create and assess programs, goals, and outcomes that integrate the sacred and the secular, the moral and the social, with proper Christian motivation? Do all programs, especially specifically Lasallian Programs consciously serve these goals? Do we assess motivation, can we, should we?

The next characteristic is, I think, the most important. Brother Luke also lists it first. It is a sensitivity to social needs. At first I thought this wording was peculiar and expected him to write something like education for the poor. But this is a far deeper and more accurate reflection of Lasallian social responsibility. It is a truism that Lasallian education is education for the poor. But it is not true that the Christian Schools were only for the poor. In fact De La Salle refused to differentiate between richer and poorer and he prohibited checking the Poor Register before admitting a student. In a sense it is too bad that Lasallian education is so closely identified with education of the poor because that
idea was not particularly new. (Salm, The Work is Yours, 49) What was original was the invention of a system to teach the poor well, to give them the skills to be productive in society, and to offer them self-esteem in a society that despised them. What was even more innovative was a willingness to educate the poor together with the not-so-poor.

The principal sources of opposition to the Brothers came from the Masters of the Little Schools and the Writing Masters. The latter were members of a guild, a medieval, monopolistic, and highly regulated institution. It is not unreasonable to see the dispute with the Brothers in terms of a medieval versus a more modern, open, and competitive approach to education. The threat to the Masters came mostly from the fact that De La Salle was also founding a teacher-training program that included training in writing instruction outside of guild jurisdiction. The opposition of the schoolmasters came out of their correct perception that the Brothers provided gratuitous education for all regardless of the ability to pay, and their recognition that the not-so-poor were willing to send their children to be educated by the Brothers. (Salm, The Work is Yours, 107-108) The most beautiful expression of this idea, still another version of what I am calling the inclusion principle, is found in the very first sentence of the very first meditation that De La Salle wrote for the Brothers’ retreat. “God is so good that, having created us, he wills that all [my emphasis] of us come to the knowledge of the truth.” (Meditations for the Time of Retreat, 193.1)

The idea of free education for all was revolutionary. It provoked lawsuits from the Masters of the Little Schools and the Writing Masters, a legal vendetta from the Clément family, and a judgement from the Parlement of Paris. More surprising was the opposition from the Church itself, from parish priests and bishops. (Salm, The Work is
Yours, 145-149; 116-117) De La Salle’s response was largely to not respond to these attacks. At first this confused me. He seemed to be backing down, unwilling to fight, not a very American thing to do. Of course he was being very French. He had not the slightest confidence that the legal establishment would support so revolutionary an idea as the social equality of all learners, so he accepted legal defeat as inevitable. But he never abandoned his vision, his principles, and his determination to accept all in the Christian Schools. This is the Founder’s heroic act.

The *Conduct of the Christian Schools* is filled with the application of this key Lasallian idea, the principle of inclusion. All students were given ink gratuitously regardless of their ability to pay. (*Conduct*, 73) Teachers placed a basket in the classroom and students, who were required to bring bread from home for their breakfast and snack, were encouraged to put any leftovers into the basket for redistribution to the poorest. (*Conduct*, 52) As we have already seen, *The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility* was meant to alleviate social inequality by inculcating behavior that allowed students to overcome the social stigma of poverty.

What does this have to do with assessment? I beg the reader’s patience as I connect this all-important sensitivity to social needs to the next characteristic, **quality of education**. Typically, this is construed as excellence of instruction, certainly a valid though not distinctive interpretation. I would like to redefine quality to mean a peculiar and essential character, that is, an attribute that makes Lasallian education unique. Once again we come back to the principle of inclusion. The Brothers made a special point of not favoring the gifted, but instead promoting the success of the less gifted. The *Conduct* reads,
[Teachers] must particularly watch those of lesser ability. They must see to it that they instruct as diligently as possible all of the students who are entrusted to them; that they neglect none and that they apply themselves equally to them all, even more to the ignorant and more negligent…. (161)

Actually, through inclusion, all students benefited. Teachers were urged to place weaker students next to more advanced ones. Again the Conduct reads,

If it happens that a student slow in mind cannot repeat properly an answer even after several others have already given it one after another, the teacher will, in order to help the student to remember the answer, have it repeated four or five times alternately by a student who knows it well and by the one who does not know it. This is done to make it much easier for the slower student to learn. (107)

The Lasallian classroom is therefore much more a cooperative than a competitive one, the gifted help the less so, the richer share with the poorer. But the gifted also benefit by becoming mentors, learning through teaching, and as teachers they become more closely attached to the Lasallian charism. These are all products of Christian relationships.

Assessment is certainly made on the basis of program, each student is regularly evaluated monthly in each subject for his ability to advance to the next level. But assessment is also one of “self-emulation:” students were assessed on their progress in comparison with themselves. (Poutet, 160) Children were encouraged to make the best progress they could. Again the Conduct reads,

The faults children like these [less gifted] commit ordinarily include not following the lesson, not reading well, not remembering or reciting catechism well, and learning nothing or very little. What is beyond their capacity must not be required of them. Neither should teachers let them become discouraged but should manage somehow to advance them, encourage them from time to time, and be satisfied with the little progress that they make. (149)

These two characteristics, a sensitivity to social needs and quality of education, pose an especially important set of assessment questions. Do we practice the principle of inclusion? Do we have programs that encourage our more gifted students to help and
serve their less gifted colleagues? Or do we separate them out, stratify them, as in Old Regime France? Do we encourage cooperative learning between students of all abilities and social backgrounds? Do we particularly serve the economically poor student? Do we specialize in helping to succeed the first student in her family to attend college? Do we assess our students not only against objective criteria but also in relation to their individual progress as well? Is a student judged successful in a Lasallian approach to assessment if he or she gets a good grade, masters the program, or if he or she makes some notable progress according to ability? Do we assess on a competitive or a cooperative basis? Do we assess by means of quantification and generalization of the group or do we also recognize and assess the individual achievement of each student? Do we consciously operate according to the dictum that “God is so good that, having created us, he wills that all of us come to the knowledge of the truth?” Do we assess the connection between the exterior and interior that De La Salle recognized as essential?

The last characteristic of Lasallian schools is its unique role in the Catholic Church. By this Brother Luke means that the Lasallian charism is simultaneously fully in communion with the Church, yet somewhat removed from it as an institution. We recall the tension between the Brothers and the clerical establishment of the Church. The Founder was wary of having clerics control either the internal affairs of the society or the operation of the schools. In most cases, the first schools were not original foundations, but were transformed by De La Salle and the Brothers into “Christian Schools,” while remaining dependent on the pastor for financial support. De La Salle always stoved for good relations with the clergy but also to retain independence from them. Here, I think, we come to the concept of brotherhood and sisterhood and back to the idea of
association, which means the free choice to work together and in cooperation. De La Salle always sent the Brothers out in twos, at least. These concepts clearly impact how we practice faculty governance, though this is not the subject of this paper. But do we faculty act independently and in conscious emulation of the spirit of brotherhood and association? Do we have governance that consciously involves and empowers all, or are decisions made by the few? More to the point, do we act in association in the classroom? Many institutions of higher learning not associated with the Lasallian school tradition, practice team teaching. Yet we almost never do. Associating teachers together in the classroom executing our most important responsibility, teaching, would be a powerful evocation of associated brother and sisterhood. While there are certainly challenges, isn’t this an effort that the administration and faculty must make?

Those, then, are six characteristics of Lasallian Schools in the USA and how they ought to reflect a particular Lasallian approach to what and how we assess teaching and learning. I would like to conclude by turning to both some bigger and more specific questions. I contend that assessment as practiced in the United States is a secular and secularizing force. It tends to separate, and to ignore moral and religious criteria. It places too much emphasis on measurement. For example, recently, more and more emphasis is being placed on objectifying education, reducing it to indisputable facts in the form of outcomes rather than individual creativity. Similarly, standardized testing is all the fashion, with the inevitable effect of homogenizing education. The dispute between proponents of evolution and those of “Intelligent Design” is a consequence of separating science from religion in our schools. Hyper-professionalization tends to separate the professoriate from the public and each other; research is often separated from
teaching. These forces are not absent at Saint Mary’s University. The Interdisciplinary Studies program has been eliminated with the net loss of a program whose goal was the integration of the disciplines. Recent reform of the general education program such as the creation of non-disciplinary-specific content areas has run out of impetus if not actually backtracked. All this threatens the Catholic Lasallian identity of the university that explicitly strives to integrate the secular and the sacred in the context of the Christian school. As Pope John Paul II wrote in *ex corde ecclesiae*, “In a Catholic University, research necessarily includes (a) the search for an integration of knowledge, (b) a dialogue between faith and reason, (c) an ethical concern, and (d) a theological perspective (par. 15, accessed online). The corrective is an explicit Lasallian approach to assessment that clearly identifies the unique characteristics of a Lasallian education, especially the inclusion principle, tracks achievement of those characteristics, both cognitive and dispositional, and employs significant effort and resources to achieve those goals. The meaning of a Lasallian university is elusive for a number of reasons. But if it means anything at all it stands for the love God has for us such that he wills all of us, together and by association, to be instructed, so that we can come to the knowledge of the truth.

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