Notes from the open discussion prompted by Richard Tristano’s paper “An Approach to Lasallian Assessment”
14 September 2006
Approx. 30 faculty members in attendance

1. Richard began by distributing an outline of his paper and by clarifying that this effort is part of a larger agenda of his “to help clarify and deepen our understanding of what it means to be a Lasallian university.” His assumption is that if we could clarify some fundamental ideas or principles, we could have fruitful conversation.

2. Next, Richard introduced three “Lasallian principles,” which, in keeping with the Christian Brothers’ tradition, draw on oral tradition as well as on the original “scripture” of the Founder’s writings:

   • The 5% solution: 95% of what we do is similar to what all universities do; the 5% remaining is what distinguishes us (Br. Louis DeThomasis).
   • The 100% solution: 100% of what we do ought to be permeated by a Lasallian spirit (Br. Bob Smith).
   • The term “Lasallian” is meaningless unless it is connected to the thought and work of John Baptiste de la Salle (Br. Luke Salm).

   Thus, we have an obligation to understand what a Lasallian university is, and for this we must turn to De La Salle’s work.

3. Three main points to reiterate before discussion:
   a. In approaching the idea of assessment in a university with a Lasallian identity, there is a tension between the two elements: universities are by nature exclusionary (students who do not meet standards of performance are excluded or fail), while Lasallian education is by nature inclusionary. Likewise, academic assessment seems to be a secular and secularizing force, but De La Salle was a true theologian, in the sense that all his thought, including his thoughts on the practicalities of education, relates to God.
   b. Things central to a Lasallian education:
      i. The life and times of De La Salle—but this alone is not enough.
      ii. Transcendent values: theology.
      iii. Key characteristics of Lasallian charism, received through “mediated theology.”
   c. Method: Br. Luke’s six characteristics I have translated into principles.

   This leaves us with the imperative that “We have to do everything every other university does, plus we have to do what Lasallian education requires.”

The floor was opened for discussion, a condensed transcription of which follows:

Mary Fox: I appreciate the work you’ve done and envy the conversations you’ve been able to have. In my own role as chairman of the Mission and Ministry Council for the
Midwest District of the Brothers of the Christian Schools

I have come to appreciate the perspective that has given me. For example, one thing we’re seeing in the Pacific/Asian region is a push to minimize Lasallian charism in its Christian manifestations. Is this bringing it to its lowest common denominator, or is it the way of the future?

Richard: My understanding is that Lasallian does not equal Catholic; they are not the same thing, but a Lasallian educator must be a person of faith. It is impossible to remove De La Salle’s educational theories from faith in God. This is somewhat “medieval” of me in its impulse to reconcile everything.

Jane Rodeheffer: Your medieval instincts are good! And if we look at the medieval models, universities have followed Abelard in their embrace of external structure and standards, and perhaps not continued to follow as they should Bernard’s model of concentration on the individual and interiority. We actually find much agreement on many Lasallian characteristics, but one is much harder: interiority, including prayer, meditation, etc., and this is probably because it’s hard.

Richard: De La Salle is characteristically medieval in wanting both together, the exteriority and the interiority.

Jane: But do we have a sense of ourselves as teachers working with students on that?

Richard: It is really hard.

Steve Pattee: Jane should be commended on her challenging, insightful comment. As an “erstwhile theologian,” I would like to speak to “mediation.” We struggle with distinctiveness in the face of secularizing forces, true, but there is no theology that is not incarnated, and that tension is always there. What was perfectly resolved in Jesus is a struggle for us now. But this tension can be creative; Christian truth can become relevant in the modern day.

Fr. Paul Nienaber: I’d like to contribute another piece: We can talk in the abstract, but here on the ground, the tension is not just between the transcendent and the immanent, but also along another axis: we live in an entirely secular culture. It’s going to be hard to be a liberal arts, Catholic, Lasallian, US, 21st-century institution. The axes we’re talking about are completely foreign to students, even to many of their parents, even to many people who work here.

The problem with putting forth issues of interiority is that people run to caricatures. Are we going to be the Catholic Lasallian Bob Jones University? Or is our Lasallian connection historical only, as we see with many eastern schools that were founded in a faith tradition but have moved away? Which model will we go with?

To be a Catholic university is to be a place where issues of interiority—issues of God—have a place at the table. Not necessarily the first place, but we take faith and reason seriously. What is the individual’s relationship to God? (Most—though not all—perspectives would be welcome in this discussion.)
Richard: My paper began with the intention of attacking assessment as un-Lasallian. And I still do perceive assessment as a secular thing.

Fr. Paul: There has always been a tension in the US between the university and the *hoi polloi*; universities are elitist.

Richard: But then a Lasallian university must be the most inclusive university possible.

Jane: Let’s face it; if success must be in terms of an outcome, then inclusiveness is out the window.

Eileen Daily: I’d like to revisit Mary’s idea: If De La Salle was a theologian, then for him, the ends of education were those of the Kingdom. What is this in a secular idiom? To what extent are we cutting out of his thought by trying to translate it to now? Cutting Christianity out of Lasallianism wouldn’t work.

Several people: De La Salle was interested in saving the souls of his students.

Dorothy Diehl: As a non-theologian, and because Lasallianism is inclusive: One can be spiritual and focused on interiority, but it need not be linked to an established religion and faith. Caring for others, and putting the common good over oneself are the crucial lessons. One can be Lasallian without “saving souls” the way De La Salle did. We can “save humanity”; we can encourage our students to think outside themselves—this is universal and can be done in any faith tradition or in no faith tradition. De La Salle said we need to educate people to create a better life, now and in the future, however that future might be understood.

Richard: For De La Salle, it’s always both, not either/or, so both interior and exterior, and (from top of p. 2 on the outline) spiritual and secular, God and neighbor, theological and social.

Valerie Edwards Robeson: I’m not sure whether I disagree with the characterization of assessment as secular(izing), but: for me it’s an issue of reclaiming assessment, which has been secularized. If God is in all that can be known, and assessment is continual seeking of all that can be known, then they go together; there is an inherent sacredness in assessment.

Richard: This was the conclusion I came to. My favorite quotation is on p. 2 of the outline: “God is so good that, having created us, he wills that all of us come to the knowledge of the truth.”

Fr. Paul: To come back to Eileen’s comment: Others have mentioned “Catholic and ---,” “both/and”—what worries me is the potential truncation of that: Christianity without Christ. For us to be a Catholic, Lasallian university (both Catholic and catholic), we must celebrate—without triumphalism or fundamentalism or totalitarianism—we must celebrate faith. The Lasallian “inclusiveness” that minimizes some axes out of discomfort
or reluctance to offend others “who might not agree” is not acceptable. It is hard—it’s a tension in which we must live; it’s the way to live.

Larry Luttmers: Speaking from the perspective of my own discipline: Br. Luke has missed the discipline of Lasallian education. It must be inclusive, but it must have limits and definition. Until we can make clear the content and method of Lasallian education, we won’t get anywhere assessing it. Lasallianism is a subject to be studied in the university. It’s more than a dispositional entity.

Br. Bob: And yet your first points were all non-dispositional. But haven’t we categorized our general education program to include knowledge, skills, and dispositions?

Jane: By disposition, we are not necessarily talking about who we want students to be, but you can assess someone’s ability to discern their disposition.

Fr. Paul: That is a skill, not a disposition.

Valerie: Dispositions are on our plan; they’re in our structure. We have agreed our students should have the capacity for self-directed learning, and also a sense of responsibility toward society in the Lasallian tradition. We do not currently assess these dispositions, however….

Richard: By the way, Kim Oren (former director of institutional assessment in the College) was very interested in this discussion and optimistic—more so than Br. Luke, in fact.

Melissa Luedtke: The difficulty often comes from language; language is what truncates. The language of interiority must honor the complexity of it, the personal aspect of it. Assessment is not anti-Lasallian; it is self-reflective, interior, an unending journey—at least 95% of it is. Only 5% of assessment is the documentation piece. (?!)

Richard: Yes, I’ve become a convert to assessment! De La Salle was doing it, and I see it now as a powerful tool—however it’s important to have the cart and the horse in the right order; assessment is a tool, not an end in itself.

Br. Bob: Conclude the discussion here; plug for the October theology lunches, to be conducted in this same inclusive spirit. Thanks to Richard.