LASALLIAN PERSPECTIVES ON GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP: A HISTORICAL VIEW

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I would like to begin this very brief summary of what we are calling Lasallian perspectives on global citizenship with a thesis statement. The expansion of Lasallian education around the world was due much more to influences external to the Institute. The Institute refers in the most formal, legal, and organizational sense to the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

Speaking of external influences, John Baptist de La Salle was born in 1651 and lived nearly his entire life during the remarkable seventy-two year reign of Louis XIV (1643-1715). Louis is famous in history not only for his lengthy reign but much more for ruling over a France that was the hegemonic power in Europe. This explains, I think, the nature of the French colonial empire. Wealthy and powerful countries, like wealthy and powerful citizens, are less motivated to seek power and fortune abroad than poorer and weaker ones. In 1492 Castile, which technically owned the Spanish Empire, and England were small and impoverished kingdoms; France had long been the most populous and wealthy country in Europe. This helps to explain that de La Salle and the Brothers came together in a culture that was Eurocentric, indeed Gallocentric. Moreover, the mission of the Brothers was to teach children of artisans and the poor. The Christian Schools were established exclusively in urban centers, where there were enough children to support a religious community. These were precisely the sort of people who were less disposed to cross the Atlantic in search of land, then the most basic source of wealth. On a much larger level this may also explain that the French colonial empire was much less a
settler empire than the English one. In 1763, at the start of the Seven Years War, also
known as the French and Indian War, there were some 65-85,000 settlers in New France
while there were more than a million in the English colonies. While English men and
women came to settle and farm, the French came mostly to engage in the lucrative fur
trade. Still another factor was religion. There were much fewer religious non-
conformists in France than England and they, the Huguenots, emigrated in much smaller
numbers than did English Congregationalists, Baptists, and Quakers.

All of these factors help to explain that in the eighteenth century there were many
fewer children in New France to educate. It also provides a context for reading a
remarkable passage in Jean-Baptist Blain’s biography of de La Salle, generally seen as
one of the most authoritative. It occurs at the very end of de La Salle’s life, when he had
been replaced by Brother Barthélemy as superior.

The Proposal for a foundation in Canada

Monsieur Charon, a very zealous man and one of the founders of the
Hospice of Canada, had come to Paris on various business matters. He strongly
insisted on having four Brothers and on bringing them back with him to that
country. His pleas were finally heard. Brother Barthelemy gave his consent, De
La Salle agreed, and in concert with the Brother Assistant, who was called to
Saint Yon especially for this matter, they chose the Brothers whom they destined
for this mission. Two days later, when the Brother Assistant was about to return
home, he went early in the morning to say good-bye to the servant of God. He
was much surprised to hear De La Salle say, Oh my God! What are you about to
do? You are going to undertake something which will cause you an infinite
number of complications and which will have disastrous consequences. Brother
Barthelemy, who had come in just then, stated that there was no way to back out
now, that everything was agreed upon and settled. In fact, the money had already
been paid for the expenses of the voyage.

But the saintly man simply repeated, What are you about to do? Then he
said no more. This repeated remonstrance so impressed the Brothers that they did
not proceed any further in this matter. After breaking off the project, they did not
have long to wait before finding out that the whole business was a pious fraud.
The good M. Charon admitted that he had planned to place the four Brothers in
separate localities, with four country parish priests, to teach the children there. In
other words, he wanted to detach these Brothers from the Institute and expose them to lose their vocation or to be cast adrift. They would surely have been lost to the Society since they would no longer have had either contact or relations with it. They would really have left it by ceasing to live in community and to practice its rules. In a word, as we have seen previously, De La Salle never wanted to send his disciples to country schools, because he would have had to dispatch them singly and abandon them to their own conduct.

The Brothers chosen for the Canadian venture were four men distinguished by their merit and virtue, since that is the sort of person needed for working among the Iroquois and the savages. De La Salle felt that they would be lost to him if they were sent. It was no doubt thanks to a supernatural inspiration that he found out about what was proposed. How else could he have foreseen the future and have read into the heart of M. Charon? The latter was obliged to substitute other persons for the Brothers, but he did not bring them with him to Canada, since he died on the return journey. He had secured from the king letters patent for six schoolmasters, but his death led to the failure of the whole scheme, and his plans were buried with him.¹

Clearly, Blain’s main point is that de La Salle had some sort of supernatural insight. Even at this early date the plans for the Founder’s canonization were being laid. But just as clear were de La Salle more terrestrial concerns, that had been honed over thirty years of conflict within the church. These were never to send less than two Brothers to staff a school. The concern here was that association, a key Lasallian idea, could only be maintained with the Brothers working together and not alone. Second, was a continuing battle with parish priests who wanted to not only control the parish school, for which they had every legal right, but also the Brothers themselves. De La Salle was resolute in preserving the independence of what became the Institute. So, according to Blain’s story de La Salle ultimately understood that the Canadian venture was a threat to both concerns. His initial agreement to the venture is explained by the fact that he was

scrupulous in not undermining the authority of Brother Barthélemy, although Blain suggests a much more supernatural explanation.

This reticence to establish schools outside of France continued through the Institutes’ first century of history. By the time of de La Salle’s death in 1719 there were 22 communities all in France (Bédel, 1:152). The one exception was the school established in Rome by the Drolin brothers in 1702. This was meant to smooth the way for papal approval of the Institute and was truly exceptional.

The first school established outside of France was opened at the invitation of the Archbishop of Ferrara, Italy in 1741. This was followed a few years later, in 1750, with a school established at Estavayer, in French-speaking Switzerland. (Ibid., 2:52) Around 1774 the Brothers arrived to take charge of a school in Fort de France, Martinique. This is really the beginning of the second phase of Lasallian global citizenship because it is connected to the second phase of the French colonial empire. In 1763 France had lost nearly all of its North American colonies in the French and Indian War. It had retained three island colonies in the Caribbean: Martinique, Guadeloupe, and the largest, Saint Domingue, later known as Haiti. By the end of the century these islands were cultivating sugar, based on slave labor, and producing huge profits. These profits, in turn, were attracting white settlers.

This development just cited is something both old and new and generally receives the appropriate title neo-colonialism. It represents a new chapter in European colonialism begun by Columbus. The quest for profit and the competition between European states were old; the participants were new, Britain and France replacing Spain and Portugal as the premier imperial powers. But most innovative was the scope of
colonization. Thanks to modern state-building European powers, even small ones like Belgium, had the capacity to domesticate nearly the entire globe by projecting armed force and a bureaucracy to govern its colonies.

By World War I France had the second largest colonial empire in the world, controlling more than 4.7 million miles of territory and exporting tens of thousands of French men, women, and children to places like Cambodia, Vietnam, and the Ivory Coast. In 1847 and 1854 respectively, schools were established in Alexandria and Cairo, Egypt. In the 1860’s schools were opened in Sri Lanka, India, Burma, Hong Kong, and Vietnam. (Rummery, 94) We could make a very long list. Of particular interest is the long-delayed advent of the Brothers to Canada in 1837. It was from Canada that the call went out for the Brothers to come to the mission territory known as the United States where they eventually established colleges, the first in the Lasallian world, in New York, Philadelphia, and Memphis.

The language of instruction in almost all of these schools was French. The students were children of colonial administrators and well-off natives who wanted their children to receive a Western education. It would be a mistake to see the proliferation of these Lasallian schools as the product of purely secular forces. Indeed, it would be difficult to separate the secular from the spiritual. For example, with the French state came the French church and efforts to evangelize native peoples. As in France, priests established parishes and invited the Brothers to open schools to educate the parish children. One such priest, Father Beurel, announced the opening of the Brothers’ school in Singapore in 1852 as follows:

The principles upon which the Brothers’ school is based will be as liberal as possibly can be: thus it will be open to everyone, whatever his creed may be;
and should, for instance, a boy of a persuasion different from that of Roman Catholics wish to attend it, no interference will take place with his religion, unless his parents or guardians express their wishes to have him instructed in the Catholic religion. Public religious instruction will be given to Roman Catholic boys either before or after school hours; but, at all times, the Masters will most carefully watch over the morals of the whole, whatever their religious persuasion may be.\(^2\)

The schools were very popular because they gave to French and native children alike a Western education and the kind of moral education parents wanted, they certainly evangelized with an aim to convert, yet they were open to accepting children of other religions and exempting them from religious education.

It is not my purpose to speak to Lasallian global citizenship as it exists today. Still, I would like to conclude by acknowledging that those external influences continue as we speak. There are three that deserve special mention. The first is the process of de-colonization that took place after World War II; the second is the Second Vatican Council; and the third is globalization itself, not a new force but certainly one that has accelerated over the past decades. So, the Lasallian schools that have survived since the nineteenth century now exist in a post-colonial world that is often more skeptical if not hostile to the West and of westernization. Vatican II ushered in a new attitude toward other Christian and non-Christian religious bodies. Conversion has been replaced by the notion of “presence:” that contact leads to tolerance and ultimately respect and acceptance. This provides the proper context for ecumenical, and interreligious dialogue, to which the Lasallian schools are dedicated.

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The expansion of Lasallian education around the world was due much more to influences external to the Institute. Here is what Brother John Johnston, the late and former superior general of the Brothers, had to say about globalization:

Globalization is a reality. We cannot simply evade, ignore, or condemn it. No alternative is evident. The Church must engage it in dialogue. This encounter demands a recognition of what is positive or has the potential to be positive…. At the same time, however, the Church must recognize and take prophetic stands on the negative elements of globalization.3

This is followed immediately by a section entitled: “The response of Lasallians: proclaim and promote the Reign of God.” And this brings us directly back to John Baptist de La Salle and his response to the Canadian venture.

It would be difficult to argue that the Brothers have played a crucial role in the history of colonization, de-colonization, and globalization. This is because they have kept their eyes on their mission to proclaim and promote the reign of God by educating children of artisans and the poor. They have let these external forces act upon them because they recognized that they could not avoid them. They have accepted globalization for what it is: a force to be dealt with but not one that can distract them from the mission that they serve. And that in sum is the Lasallian perspective on global citizenship: that we are all children of God.

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