

# LASALLIAN IDENTITY

Br. Antonio Botana

Lasallian identity is a shared characteristic: it is “collective”. Those of us who call ourselves Lasallians can recognise one another and be recognised by others in the way we live, act and are. We have values which embody certain principles and certain criteria. All these result in a satisfying harmony within ourselves. We are members of the church and our world but we have something special to offer.

Identity is a living thing which cannot be analysed or codified. When we talk about it and tell ourselves what we are, we attempt to find key concepts, certain central principles, and we do that from a definite point of view. We must not confuse identity with the outlines which we use when talking about it. There are lots of ways of defining Lasallian identity, some of which are simple, others more complicated, but in them all, if they are genuine, we find certain necessary elements which can help us distinguish the essential from the variable.

In this lecture I shall itemise lasallian identity numerically as follows: 3 by 3+1 (=10). The outline is the scheme which will be our guide in what follows.

- identity is first and foremost a gift.
- it is a journey during which identity gradually grows.
- identity is an outward sign which leads to a certain culture, and which has various easily recognisable forms.
- collective identity takes on different outward expression depending on each person.

## I. LASALLIAN IDENTITY IS A GIFT.

### 1.1 The gift of the community.

As we have said, Lasallian Identity is firstly a gift, freely given and ready made; a present, so to speak, which we have not earned ourselves.

We find this gift in a variety of persons grouped as a family, or community or fraternity - its name is not important. Whatever it is called, it gives those who have it, the right to be called Lasallians. The members of this group are a current transmitting Lasallian identity to others. It is not a matter of being signed up and mentioned in some official or unofficial list. One becomes a member through the relationship that members have with one another.

Lasallian community is the first sign of Lasallian identity; it is a lay fraternity centred on Christ, attentive to the educational needs of the poor and more widely to the needs of all young people. It is committed to finding answers to those needs in keeping with the teachings of the Gospel.

Membership of the community is a road pointing in two directions, one of which, a gift, is only a seed which has to grow and mature. We have to ensure this growth in a community setting with the mission in mind. We have to forge ever stronger links in the fraternity, links deeper than mere mutual empathy aimed at the mutual help of those in the group. Our Lasallian identity grows so

long as we try to encourage this fraternity whose objective is the educational service of the poor, not only by drawing up efficient teaching programmes, but by being examples of the kind of person we want to educate, that is persons solidly fraternal, and in the final analysis, men and women who follow the teachings of Jesus.

## **1.2 The gift of the Founder**

We receive another gift to help in creating Lasallian identity: the person of St. John Baptist de La Salle. He is the gift from the Holy Spirit helping us to form Lasallian identity in the church and the world. In other words we members of the Lasallian family are the inheritors of the treasures of our Lasallian family, we inherit the family qualities by the way we live and serve and by our Christian faith.

As members of the Lasallian family we feel especially close to other family members, who throughout history have been examples of the most precious traits of the family, persons like Benildus, Miguel, Mutien, Scubilion, Theodoreto, and many others.

This gift of the family, we could say affiliation, is dual purpose: we do not see in John de La Salle merely an example more or less achievable, because our identity grows to the extent that he is our model and spiritual guide, so that we have to compare our gospel journey with his by reading his writings.

## **1.3 The gift of the charism**

Belonging and imitating de La Salle results in another gift, rather hidden in fact, but one which gives life to the others. It is the Lasallian charism, a gift from the Holy Spirit to the church in the person of de La Salle and recognisable in the Lasallian family.

Charism is a strength, a way of looking at things, a certain sensitivity when confronted with requirements, which in our case are the educational requirements of the poor and of youth. We thus become responsible and aware of solutions to those need: and are able to choose the best of them for the particular requirement of the moment.

Our Lasallian charism helps us to discern that it is the poor and youth who are our special concern and when we educate others we still bear in mind that our main concern is the poor and youth. We are able to recognise various kinds of poverty, but it is economic poverty which is our main objective, because other kinds of poverty often have their origin in economic poverty.

Lasallian charism helps us to convert all our educational work into an evangelisation where the student is central and the methodology is based on the Gospel.

Lasallian charism is community-centred. Community is a solid basis which allows us a foothold on dry land, so to speak, and where we can march ahead on our mission; it is fertile soil where education can flourish, a promised land which we enjoy and which we want our students to enjoy also.

Through this charism we begin to value our profession of educator and discover its true meaning, so that it really becomes a ministry of the church.

Such is the gift which the Holy Spirit gives us. But it is two directional, because it requires effort on our part to maintain a creative mentality by making the charism fit the circumstances that we encounter in the journey of life. Having received this charism we listen to the Holy Spirit and are directed by Him, as de La Salle so often suggested.

## **2. LASALLIAN IDENTITY IS A JOURNEY.**

Therefore fortified by this triple gift, we can set out. Our journey begins in community and it is in community that we work together.

The journey points in three directions, directions which we aim at together however whilst at work and not when we have finished it.

- It is a missionary journey aimed at helping the poor and the young.

- A journey in which we have experience of God.

- A spiritual journey, an understanding of the real meaning of life, a delving into the very roots of our being.

### **2.1 A missionary journey**

When considering our mission, the Lasallian charism is represented by the symbol of a journey. Mission is always a voyage of discovery (Brothers' Rule 51), there are no hard and fast rules, educational establishments are not essential, because buildings are mere means to an end. Our only fundamental dedication is to the poor. It is not enough to say we are dedicated to youth; we have to be dedicated to young people who are poor. Even when we are teaching well-to-do students, we have the poor in mind and we aim at making those richer students conscious of the poor people around them.

We begin each step of the journey by enquiring about the needs of those we deal with, in other words the needs of real people. We are not satisfied with simply imparting knowledge and skills; these must be taught in the context of community and the Gospel.

### **2.2 A journey in which we have experience of God**

One's experience of God becomes alive in one's meeting with others, in togetherness, consecration and mission. It is a journey in which we contemplate the history of salvation, from the perspective marked out for the Lasallian Mission. We can synthesise this experience from two perspectives. In his meditations numbers 193 and 201 "On the Ministry of Christian Education", De La Salle says these two perspectives are like two nuclei within the same sphere: God wishes all to know him and to be saved.

God is a trinity united for the Mission. The Father, the Son and the Spirit share the mission of salvation and allow us to be associated in that mission.

We find ourselves situated between those two nuclei. We live the experience of the Light which God has placed in our hearts in order to enlighten: the young students who are the objective of our mission. We are mediators for them with the God of Salvation.

In the same way that the mission leads to experience of God of Salvation, we enter the field of education contemplate the reality of young people suffering from poverty. We do this with the merciful eyes of God, full of confidence that each person is capable of growth and renewal.

### **2.3 A Spiritual Journey**

This experience of the ebb and flow of regard for the God of Salvation and regard for the young we have to save, is known in Lasallian terminology as the spirit of faith and of zeal.

On this journey of mission and contemplation we discover ourselves and realise the need of cultivating the spirit which makes sense of all we do and of all that we are. That is how the Lasallian spirituality evolves, a spirituality of mediation. We ourselves are links between the God who saves and the poor who need to be saved. And the need we have of finding reasonable answers for the poor, causes to have recourse to God for the gifts we need in our mission.

Through it we discover the kind of community we have to form and the kind of education we have to impart as God's work and we recognise ourselves as representatives of Jesus Christ.

Spirituality is a search for meaning. The Founder outlined this spirituality with great objectivity when he pointed out that the word of God is our best guide to enlightening and rewarding our search. Therefore De La Salle invites us to act with faith based on Scripture when we are making mental prayer and meditation, that most intense opportunity for spirituality and that most effective time in our search for meaning and for God.

### **3. LASALLIAN IDENTITY IS TO BE SEEN IN CULTURE AND HISTORY**

We are talking about a shared or collective identity and as such it is felt not only within persons but is seen in a multitude of different ways; it even produces a kind of culture common to all who share it and which rises above the differences of country, race, culture, geography, but which is possessed by all who share this Lasallian identity.

Identity is not synonymous with the way it is described. It is not rare for this description to be seen in many different Lasallian cultures which have not much to do with Lasallian identity. But certain it is that the cultural expression which reflects our identity allows us to recognise ourselves as the same as other Lasallians in different parts of the world. By means of these descriptions we can understand the experiences and sentiments which are at their root.

I can mention here three different ways of expressing Lasallian Identity.

### **3.1 Family icons or reminders.**

These family icons, or family heirlooms, are common symbols which members of the same family understand in the same way. We recognise ourselves in them, they reflect for us our history and our identity. Looking at them allows us to connect with the deep experiences and feelings of those who were their originators. And this contemplation results in certain attitudes common to the family.

For example, in many parts of the Lasallian world there are pictures of De La Salle with two children, nowadays a boy and a girl, or pictures with the saint pointing heavenwards. This is not simply a picture, but what we could call a real icon expressing fundamental traits of our identity: mission, the work of God, mediation in the ministry, the attitude of the educator.

There are other more elementary icons, common to the whole Lasallian world, like the de La Salle coat of arms with its message of "Indivisa manent", (Always united) or the star with the message "Signum Fidei" (Sign of Faith)

There are many more icons in the Lasallian bibliography, but as there are not many pictures of them, we hardly realise that they are real expressions of Lasallian identity. For example:

-The three wise men following the star and finally adoring Jesus, in Meditation 96 for the Epiphany. It tells us of the educators' journey of faith, led by God's inspiration and then of our meeting with Jesus in the sacramental encounter with our students.

-St Martin of Tours cutting his cloak in two and giving one half to a poor beggar (Meditation 189). We need to be reclothed with the spirit of Jesus in order to share it with our students. All the gifts we have received from the Spirit are to be used in helping in our mission.

-Jacob's dream with the angels going up and down a ladder (Med 198). This represents our prayer as ministers. We need to pray, to turn, to God, to listen to His word, because our responsibility to our students requires it.

### **3.2 Common culture, vocabulary, formulae.**

Based on our spirituality and our understanding of what education is, we have acquired certain ways of expressing our ideas, certain formulae containing a depth of meaning. Of course these will lose a lot of their force if we do not revise our understanding of them from time to time, in order to make them our own and to help new arrivals on our scene to grasp their significance and their hidden wealth.

With careful use, this culture of vocabulary and expression greatly strengthens our sense of belonging to the same family and assists us in handing on the essential elements of our Lasallian identity.

Centralising our spirituality on Christ is well expressed in our community prayer: *Live Jesus in our hearts*. And our sense of collaborating in the Work of God is seen in that

other formula of ours which begins many of our daily activities: *Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God*. The importance of our educational work is expressed in this term: *ministry*. We say that we are *ministers and representative of Jesus Christ*, which is an expression found in Paul's epistles and in the writings of de La Salle.

There are many expressions in our daily use which date back to our origins and all of them are charged with emotive meaning, because they refer to important aspects of our identity, sometimes with reference to community, at other times to educational and spiritual elements like: *together by association, touching the hearts of our students, through the movement of the Spirit* (“*par le mouvement de l'Esprit*”).

Now culture continues to grow with the result that new forms of expression appear for example: The Lasallian Evangelical journey; or those recent summaries of lasallian identity: *Faith, fraternity, service, or faith, service and community*.

### **3.3 Identity becomes part of history and is constantly retold.**

In order to recognise identity, either personal or collective, we must know the history at the origin of that identity. When we speak of a especially necessary to know its foundational or the history of its origins.

In reading this history there is a risk of simply seeing only the external, anecdotal story of long ago. If we do that we shall miss the point of identity. We must read the original history as a myth, trying to understand what goes beyond the historical details and what in them has relevance to us now. In that way we can perceive in the community itinerary or journey of 1680 to 1690 a dynamism which changes it completely. In the same way we can see or guess at the feelings, attitude and proposals of those persons who now commit themselves, who face difficulties, who make new beginnings and who try to express their evolving identity without having adequate means or vocabulary to do so.

When we read the myth of our foundations, the events replete with meaning; we can say that these events express our identity. That is why the General Chapter of the year 2000, bearing this in mind, told us that "The original vow which associated our Founder and twelve brothers in 1694 with the educational service of the poor is the source of the association between Lasallian lay people and Brothers who nowadays want to unite in working in the Lasallian Mission. That is the origin of our new understanding of association for the mission. (Circular 447, pp. 3-4).

If we continue such a reading of the foundational myth we realise for example that when the first brothers, in 1684, chose the name "Brothers of the Christian Schools", they were proclaiming the very essence of their own identity, which is a fraternity for the educational mission, a ministerial fraternity, a union of persons for the mission.

#### 4. COLLECTIVE, BUT PERSONALIZED IDENTITY

Lasallian identity, like any collective identity, must be personalized in each individual with different nuances and variations. There was a time when Lasallian identity was exclusive to the Brothers, that is, a celibate, consecrated males. There were already many differences seen in "The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today A Declaration": *"The socio-cultural origin, the psychological maturity, and the variety of human and Christian experience differ, from one individual to another and in the successive stages of the person's life."* (D 14.2).

People can live the Lasallian identity today as religious or lay, man or woman, celibate or married. in a great variety of societies and cultures in the world, as Catholic, or other Christian denomination, but also from within other religious traditions. The Spirit blows where it will and its charisms extend beyond the official structures of the Church.

We tend to read Lasallian identity today almost exclusively from the perspective of the Brothers, and from within the European or American context. From now on we must enrich this reading from new perspectives. This is already beginning to happen with lay partners. Probably a feminine reading will manifest many aspects of Lasallian identity that we barely take into account at the present time.

When another group, like our lay partners, enters into a collective identity traditionally lived by a determined group, like the Brothers, the first tendency is to copy what the first group did, using that group as a model. The second phase expresses more originality in the desire to live out the specific group identity. This is where the tension of two poles begins: allow space for diversity and, at the same time, maintain what ought to be the common nucleus essential to the collective identity. To the extent that the new groups of different provenance enrich the composition of the Lasallian family, it become increasingly necessary to reinforce the common bond, to facilitate the identification of the diverse members with the cultural and spiritual nucleus of the family. That is why there is so much interest today in being able to express for ourselves clearly what the Lasallian identity essentially is.