TEACHING MINDS AND TOUCHING HEARTS:
THE LASALLIAN CATECHEtical TRADITION CONSIDERED

BY BOB CARREJO

In October 2014, the General Council of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools released a document titled, Visions and Themes, as part of resources for “A Gospel Adventure,” the Lasallian theme for the 2015-2016 liturgical year.

The document explored modern elements and challenges of the Lasallian mission. One of these was the fundamental understanding expressed in the Rule: The life and educational activity of the Brothers are integral parts of the Church’s work of evangelization. They believe that catechesis, as the Founder insisted, is “their principal function” (17).

This raises an important question for the entire Lasallian family and its grasp of its mission and purpose: what does it mean to evangelize and catechize in the Lasallian tradition? What does it look like, what are its challenges, and what is its importance to the life of the Lasallian mission?

The question has been raised before. In September 2006, Saint Mary’s Press in Winona, Minnesota, hosted the Symposium on Catechesis in the Lasallian Tradition, in which Lasallian educators submitted and discussed white papers on this topic. Their work produced a number of themes related to the particular vision and characteristics of Lasallian religious education.

De La Salle Today contacted five Brothers and Partners, including several participants of the 2006 Saint Mary’s Press event, to reflect on some of those original themes. A shortened version of this article appeared in the spring 2016 issue of De La Salle Today themed “A Gospel Adventure.” The Q&A that follows is an edited version of the full interviews.

Is there a distinctive “Lasallian” catechetical tradition?

Brother Armand Alcazar, FSC, Professor of Theology, Lewis University, Romeoville, Illinois: Yes, there is a distinctive “Lasallian” catechetical tradition. We instill Gospel values. We exercise a special option toward the poor. We create and sustain respectful human relationships in community. We develop and maintain diverse programs meeting recognized standards of excellence. We are animated by and foster a spirit of faith and zeal.

Greg Kopra, Director, Lasallian Formation for Mission, District of San Francisco New Orleans: I would describe the Lasallian catechetical approach as focusing on several elements: student-centered; knowledge, understanding and behavior; teacher-pupil relationship; propose, not impose; critical engagement with elements of religion and faith; sacramental – God is present and active in the world, and we respond to God in the everyday (a paraphrase of Thomas Groome); age-appropriate; and well-prepared and well-formed teachers.

What does Lasallian catechesis “typically” look like in your locality?

Sylvain Beauregard, Director General, Centre Notre-Dame de la Rouge, Grenville-sur-la-Rouge, Québec, Canada: As you know, the Francophone Canada District has no more schools, but today works in the field of pastoral ministry animation. We receive school groups throughout the school year and adapt our programs to their expectations. Centre Notre-Dame de la Rouge welcomes many of those schools that are Catholic schools and which organize field trips as an extension of the religion classes. We allow the children to experience many activities that make them aware of their spiritual life. The school considers it a part of its school curriculum.
What would you say has been the most significant contribution of the Lasallian catechetical tradition to the Catholic tradition?

Brother John Crawford, FSC, Assistant Professor of Religion, La Salle University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: The outstanding contribution of the Lasallian legacy, from its simple roots in the first three parish schools in Reims to the worldwide network of educational ministries today, is founded upon the belief that each person is a special work of God worthy of dignity and open to the opportunity that schooling can provide. Michel Sauvage’s description of this way of seeing, grounded in viewing everything and everyone with the “eyes of faith,” is “mystical realism.” Lasallians have always been encouraged to be practical, to set high goals, to encourage great expectations, but also to be aware of the obstacles and dependent upon God’s grace to manage the difficulties that are faced by those entrusted to our care. For the teacher, the marvelous challenge is to understand this work as a ministry that allows us to find God in the faces of those whom we instruct. For the student, the interactions with one another and with their teachers allow them to be appreciated, supported, challenged and directed toward their unique vocations to serve the Lord who calls them. Ideally, all Catholic religious education and faith formation tries to accomplish these great goals. For we Lasallians, the written and lived legacy of La Salle and the Brothers serves to testify eloquently to these high ideals.

Brother Armand: Even, or especially, when there is great risk involved, we have been able to let go of what was and start anew. Our most recent move in the 80s to allow for other laity (the Brothers are also lay) to join with us in a more complete fashion was both generous and genius. Similar to the spirit in Mark 9:38, we Brothers opened up our work and our leadership to the lay movement.

On a practical level, what should catechizing in a Lasallian ministry look like?

Brother Armand: First of all, the tradition is biblically based in general and Gospel oriented specifically. Next, that tradition is biased toward underserved youth, or young adults, in an educational setting, that leads to hope and success both in this world and the next. In other words, the Lasallian catechetical tradition is in tandem with the preferential option for the poor. Most of our schools are not in direct service to the poor. My experience in our schools has been that most teachers and staff and administrators understand, accept and embrace that it is the responsibility of the entire community to educate the young people entrusted to their care – and education includes religious education/formation. Some are directly involved with religious education/formation through their responsibilities as a religious studies teacher, a campus minister and the like. All are involved in religious education/formation by virtue of the example of their lives and the way they form caring, authentic relationships with the students.

The symposium identified a number of essential characteristics of Lasallian education, including that it is the ministry as a whole that is responsible for its students’ religious education/formation. Where do you think we stand today with this?

Brother Frederick Mueller, FSC, Coordinator of Faculty/Staff Professional Development and Lasallian Formation, La Salle Academy, Providence, Rhode Island: From my own experience, Lasallian schools do provide the environment for the Christian education of the young. The total environment of the school must support the proclamation of the Good News – prayer, liturgy, service, creation of community, religious instruction – a strong religion department and an equally strong campus ministry program. Every adult need not be a catechist; however, every adult must proclaim the Good News of God’s unconditional love by word and action.

Greg: My experience in our schools has been that most teachers and staff understand, accept and embrace that it is the responsibility of the entire community to educate the young people entrusted to their care – and education includes religious education/formation. Some are directly involved with religious education/formation through their responsibilities as a religious studies teacher, a campus minister and the like. All are involved in religious education/formation by virtue of the example of their lives and the way they form caring, authentic relationships with the students.
Where does the recollection of the presence of God fit into the dynamic of religious education? It stands at the center of Lasallian spiritual practice, and yet can be the most difficult to quantify.

**Brother John:** Remembering the Holy Presence of God represents the core of Lasallian spirituality. Its subtlety, simplicity and profundity are unsurpassed. The more often people are reminded of God’s omnipresence the more aware we become of our graced existence. I don’t think that the lack of quantification is all that important.

**Brother Frederick:** Presence of God is key – students need to come to the realization of and have an experience of God as an integral part of their lives. Otherwise, neither theology nor moral living make sense. Young people are hungry for silence, reflection, a sense of integration.

Another essential characteristic given attention was cultural and religious diversity and pluralism. Have the understanding and implications of this changed since 2006?

**Brother John:** The world since 2006 continues to be a place where our interaction with diversity has increased while tolerance for difference has seemingly lessened. On the positive side, Pope Francis has spoken eloquently for the common bonds among humanity. The public face of Catholicism tends to be more open to the other. Dialogue is held in high esteem. The other side is the increased tensions worldwide over religious radicalism. The plight of refugees from the Middle East, the posturing of groups like ISIS, and internal matters regarding religious difference being debated in U.S. politics indicate how far we still must go to embrace diversity.

**Greg:** Our schools are becoming more religiously diverse each year. The need for ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue is great. There is much we can learn from each other, and the Catholic Church supports this sort of dialogue.

The symposium also identified as a characteristic that service, especially of the poor, is a normative dimension of Lasallian education. With changing times and our evolving awareness of “new poverties,” what challenges does this hold for Lasallian catechesis?

**Greg:** The Catholic Church has a rich social justice tradition. Our work in this area provides a powerful and profound bridge to the broader Catholic Church for our schools. And education for justice and service on behalf of those on society’s margins are powerful doorways into faith for adolescents. They want to make a difference in the world, and to help them see that the Lasallian Catholic tradition provides ways for them to do just that – urges them, compels them, to do just that – is another way to invite teenagers into substantial conversations about faith and life.

**Brother Frederick:** I think it allows for a greater variety of service experiences. It also opens new areas of concern, e.g. dealing with the immigrant population. A Lasallian world without borders.

What demands do diversity and pluralism in our ministries place on how they do catechesis?

**Brother Armand:** Decades ago, I took my first trip to the missions of Guatemala. There was an implication that our Brothers in the missions were those who were the most Lasallian because they were in direct service to the poor. (Some missionaries did this, others did not, by the way. Some of our missions served the wealthy of the country.) As powerful and positive this experience was, I figured out, with much guilt initially, that I was not called to be in direct service amongst the poor. However, I’ve found that my call is that I can turn a number of students toward direct service with the poor. The poor, the marginalized, the underserved are constant phrases, ideas and loves of which I speak in all of my classes.

**Brother Frederick:** It makes it much more complicated. It raises questions: how to provide for the diverse backgrounds; how to be Catholic and also respectful of other traditions.

**Brother John:** Good catechesis always guarantees that learners have access to a full understanding of our most cherished beliefs. In a diverse world, this catechetical effort does not require us to sugarcoat everything so as to diminish the challenge of religious differences. Rather, to do justice to our Catholic Christian heritage, good catechesis requires us to face the difficult questions. What stands front and center is a Christian anthropology which emphasizes the God-given dignity of all persons, due full respect for their deeply held beliefs. Without coercion or violence, we must forge ways to create a world that mirrors the best hopes of God’s Reign: a place of justice, peace and nurture where all people may thrive, a world where one’s deepest convictions are encouraged without diminishing the beliefs of others.
For many years, there has been vigorous debate within the Lasallian family as to the critical meaning of our understanding of “service of the poor.” What do you see as the relationship between a ministry’s connection to the poor and marginalized and its ability to do catechesis in the Lasallian tradition?

**Brother John:** The so-called “vigorous debate” within the Lasallian world about “service of the poor” has been the source of much soul-searching. There is no doubt that John Baptist de La Salle’s initial fervor was to provide a Christian education to the children of poor and working class parents who had few alternatives to provide for the instruction of their children. Over the centuries, the work of Lasallian education was essential elementary education, most often in urban locations, among ordinary people. In the United States, Lasallian education was instrumental in providing for the children of immigrant Catholics in a nation that was often hostile to them and their faith. More recent developments, such as the emergence of the Miguel schools in the United States, and the many worldwide ministries meeting the needs of the economically poor, have reemphasized the centrality of the high regard that Lasallians have toward meeting the needs of the poor.

Two developments in recent years are having an impact on how this commitment continues to be lived. First, and on the positive side, the emphasis of the recent General Chapters of the Brothers, most especially the Chapter of 2014, have expanded the language of this mandate in encouraging Lasallians to minister “for and with the poor.” The nuance of this change opens new possibilities. Even in schools that might serve a better off group of people, the question of how to be for and with the poor challenges the sense of mission to go deeper and find ways of serving that may not have been obvious before. This new emphasis reinforces the commitment of schools to provide some openings and financial support to economically poor students. It encourages school ministries to provide opportunities for direct service to poor people in the school’s neighborhood. It keeps us open to the possibility of learning from the poor, who have much to teach us. Second, and less hopeful, is the dilemma of Catholic education, especially in the United States, today. Often poor families do not even consider the possibility of enrolling their children into Catholic schools. The preponderance of charter schools has had a devastating effect on Catholic inner-city schools. Why pay any tuition for a Catholic education if charter schools provide a reasonable alternative to public schooling at no cost?

There has been some experimenting in places to establish Lasallian-modeled charter schools. While this experimental venture does seem to address many economic aspects of schooling, it does not settle how our Lasallian Catholic identity can be maintained without the explicit teaching of religion. A challenge for the next few years will be to explore new models of funding while maintaining the Catholic/Lasallian integrity of the mission.

The symposium also listed essential characteristics of the Lasallian teacher, including that the Lasallian educator welcomes the transformative love of God that acts through and within the student-teacher relationship. Is it overstatement to say that it is the person and the activity of a school’s adults in regard to its students that determines whether or not Lasallian catechesis is occurring in the ministry?

**Brother John:** Most teachers realize that when we perform our ministry, we learn from our students. There is a wonderfully graced mutual exchange that abounds the schools. However, schools primarily exist to serve the needs of students. Therefore, I do not see it as an overstatement that adults are the principal ministers of Lasallian education. Similarly, it is the responsibility of the adults in the schools to organize and maintain their ministries. That reality should not diminish the rightful attention and openness that school leaders and teachers must have to the ideas, hopes, dreams and needs of the students. From a catechetical perspective, it is the duty of catechists to attend to the students by understanding them as unique persons and listening to them as they express themselves. Tailoring our ministry to them in their lived reality, rather than simply delivering a predetermined package of religious material, insures that real religious education happens.

How does the Lasallian catechetical tradition accompany Catholic students in deepening their Catholic identity, as well as non-Catholic students in deepening their own religious understanding?

**Greg:** The Lasallian catechetical tradition did not appear out of thin air. Rather, it emerged out of and faithful to the Catholic catechetical tradition. So evangelization and catechesis in Lasallian schools should reinforce, inform, deepen and strengthen one’s Catholic faith. Done respectfully and professionally, evangelization and catechesis in Lasallian schools will certainly be informative for students from other or no faith tradition and, hopefully, will result in their reflection upon their own faith tradition.

I also think that it makes sense that religious education in Lasallian schools would include study of the world’s great religions to help better prepare students to participate actively and responsibly in our pluralistic, multi-religious world.
Brother Armand: The Gospels are completely relational. Some of our Catholic students, specifically those who are marginally Catholic, are amazed at how relational, and therefore relevant, the Gospels are. As a professor of theology, in teaching to a class of Catholic, Protestant and non-Christian students, the Gospels are so inclusive, forgiving, whole-making and community-building that there doesn’t have to be difficulty. How important is a ministry’s service/immersion activity to its catechetical efficacy?

Brother Frederick: Absolutely essential. The student needs to experience that faith and action/zeal are one and the same spirit.

Brother Armand: Remembering the days when service programs were being introduced into our schools, and being a pioneer in one of our schools in this introduction, I am encouragingly amazed at how integral these programs are to all of our institutions. So many of our students talk about these service components as “life changing opportunities” rather than “busy-body requirements” now. Immersion activities are integral to the Lasallian catechetical tradition.

Brother John: In some respects, this question is asking us to define how people learn. The experiential dimension of education has long been celebrated. Effective education can never simply stop in the mind. Rather, education is for life and living. We often learn best what we have learned by doing. At what point does something we have learned to do become part of our education? Many theorists, like John Dewey, would insist that learning is not complete until students have time to reflect upon what they have learned to do. From the perspective of Lasallian “catechetical efficacy,” that principle requires that students learn to do for others, but also have the opportunity and support to reflect upon its meaning, in light of the Gospel. Service and immersion activity is thereby lifted beyond just being nice things to do. Instead, the efficacious place for service/immersion learning is found in the interactions among students and mentors who provide the time and context to reflect upon the relationship between doing good for others, especially those in deep need, and the “maxims of the Gospel” as La Salle would have understood them. Essentially, this vital part of learning happens when doing good for others is seen as a personal and necessary response to the teachings of Jesus Christ.

How do the religious instruction and spiritual formation programs in your District’s ministries incorporate attention to service of the poor and marginalized?

Sylvain: Camp Notre-Dame de la Rouge offers educational programs on social justice and preparation camps for humanitarian aid abroad. The camp has a youth fund for poor children. Last year we gave over $25,000.00 to help children to afford a camp session here.

The Brothers have been at various times leaders in developing catechetical methodologies and resources of significant use and influence within Catholic education as a whole. What do you see as the status and potential of that tradition today?

Brother John: We have reason to have hope and give thanks. First, as technology continues to shrink the world, the positive result is that global interaction at an immediate level is now possible. That bodes well for the Lasallian world. The Generalate of the Brothers in Rome can emerge as a catalyst for sharing great ideas among Lasallians. As affinity groups emerge, such as IALU [International Association of Lasallian Universities] or SIEL [International Session of Lasallian Studies], it is possible for educational professionals to exchange ideas or to collaborate on research which will truly have global dimensions. The strength of Lasallian education today is that we do minister within a global network. Second, within the United States, various initiatives for ongoing formation opportunities, such as the [Brother] John Johnston Institute [of Contemporary Lasallian Practice] or the Buttmer Institute [of Lasallian Studies], have already proven to be vital to bringing engaged colleagues together around their shared identity as Lasallians. Third, the existence of a reputable publishing house, Saint Mary’s Press, with its related specialty departments, Anselm Academic and Professor’s Choice, mean that the Lasallian network can disseminate great ideas in traditional book/pamphlet form as well.
The growing spirit of cooperation and collaboration among the Lasallians from around the world allows us to investigate best practices, to stimulate new ideas, and to dialogue about the implementation of effective strategies quite well. May we continue to explore the possibilities that our global network affords us. These means represent the best ways of influencing Catholic education within our schools and beyond them.

**Greg:** Saint Mary’s Press has done marvelous work for a very long time now developing catechetical methodologies and resources for Catholic schools. Their recent work in a new high school religious studies curriculum, combined with a great deal of resources available via their website, and combined with their work on virtual classrooms attached to their curricular resources continues their long tradition of providing great tools for religious studies educators. Their work in programs and resources for campus ministry, parish youth ministry, and parish catechesis continues to be excellent as well. Can we do more? Certainly. And I hope we do.

**How do you think the work of being a catechist has changed from when you first began your career? What excites you the most? What concerns you the most?**

**Brother Frederick:** I see a lot of differences: Brothers not the catechists; complexity of the world; diversity; etc. What excites me is the new direction for evangelization promoted by Pope Francis. What concerns me is the school’s inability to network with families and parishes to offer a consistent message to the young.

**Brother Armand:** What excites me is that “It ain’t over ‘til it’s over.” I’m delighted that I can still learn more about teaching at 67 years of age. My definition of old age is: “Learned enough for now.” Once that happens, I hope to retire or be fired. Also, in a typical class, I find that there are fewer and fewer students who admit to having any religious foundation. They know less today than ever. Yet, I’ve never found students so interested in an academic understanding of God, religion, ethics, spirituality, etc. I’ve never found it easier to be a catechist than now. This excites me.

What concerns me is that I don’t think that Catholic schools as a whole and even Lasallian schools have met together to talk about this problem of how we are to exist in the very near future. Do we teach our target populations and possibly suffer economically and put ourselves in jeopardy, or do we teach away from our target populations in order to reach those who can pay us enough to feel comfortable? I believe that we’ve been ostriches when it comes to this issue.

**Brother John:** As someone approaching 40 years in Lasallian education, I see many wonderful developments in the catechetical world that have emerged over time. One of the most notable developments is the emergence of campus ministry in schools. This phenomenon has served as a catalyst to engage students better.

My greatest concern surrounds what it must mean to be a young person today. I find increasing numbers of the young people I teach to be essentially unchurched. My concern ramps up further when I observe how electronic communications dominate the lives of many young people to the point that they seem to be permanently attached to their smart phones. My fear is that many of them live in a world of electronic isolation. They relate better to the machine than they do to people. How we Lasallian educators find ways to break through this indifference and isolation will increasingly become our task in the foreseeable future.
What do you feel is the future of Lasallian religious education in your District? What will be its greatest challenges?

**Sylvain:** Christian/Catholic religious education in Québec is in crisis. This is both a challenge and an opportunity. A challenge in that the human and financial resources are poor or even, in many cases, absent. It is also a challenge because Church authorities cannot reach the vast majority of young people who do not understand the language of the Church (and) some values of hypermodernity go against the spiritual needs of people. The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few.

To what do you feel Lasallian catechesis in general is being called today and how can it best respond?

**Greg:** I think the future is bright! Continued study of our Lasallian heritage, and of the Catholic Christian faith tradition which inspired its founders and which continues to inspire us today, will result in evangelization and catechesis in our schools which is transformative for young people from various faith traditions – and for those from no faith tradition.

**Brother Frederick:** The Lasallian catechetical tradition has a future. It does need to return to its roots. The need for evangelization of the young is real, especially in this present culture with all the internal and external pressures on young people, be it the depersonalization of social media or the threats to the environment. To respond to these needs Lasallians need to be well-trained, they need to be persons of faith and zeal, they need to be passionate about justice and compassionate toward the victims of injustice, they need to not be afraid of young people – open to loving them with all their graces and all their “warts” – and they need to be able to serve as mentors and role models. The Lasallian school needs to be a hothouse for Christian living where young people feel safe to explore and to make mistakes, and at the same time can be nurtured in love and empowered. I have great hope for the future of the Lasallian catechetical tradition.

For further reading on Lasallian catechesis, review the following resources:


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*Sylvain Beauregard speaks at the inauguration of the Lasallian Region of North America in May 2012 in Laval, Québec.*