

Gros, Jeffrey. "The Challenge of the Lasallian Catechist in the Late Twentieth-Century United States: One Lasallian Journey." *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 4, no. 3 (Institute for Lasallian Studies at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota: 2013).

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The Challenge of the Lasallian Catechist in the Late Twentieth-Century United States: One Lasallian Journey

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We have been richly blessed in the catechetical ministry of the Church and the Lasallian tradition since the time of John Baptist de la Salle. Lasallians in the United States especially pass on a noble heritage of handing on the faith inspired by the vision, creativity and professionalism of Brothers John Joseph McMahon (†1942) and Alphonsus Pluth (†1986). I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to study with Alphonsus, to have read the works left behind by John Joseph in the Midwest District (then St. Louis) and to listen to skilled practitioners who embody the gift of the Lasallian heritage to the Church for half a century.

Alphonsus founded Saint Mary's Press in 1943² and John Joseph founded *The La Salle Catechist* in 1934. For those of us who joined the Institute in the 1950s and began teaching in the 1960s, these were our regular nourishment and preparation for the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). The U.S. brothers replaced the question and answer catechisms in the 1940s with narrative texts, much influenced by the Kerygmatic Catechetical renewal and later American emphasis on experience.³

I was assigned to graduate study in 1965, the last year of the Council. The visitor moved me out of biology studies which I had taught for six years, and for which I was enrolled in doctoral studies at Northwestern University. Since that time I continued in high school, college and eventually graduate school and seminary teaching of religion; catechist and deacon formation; and finally national and international leadership in what turned out to be a catechetical and theological specialty: Christian ecumenism.

In the early days after the Council, especially during the 1970s, the trained Brother had to be available for a variety of formation work; with the new liturgical rites, social teaching of the Church, and new developments in ecumenical relations; almost week by week it seemed – in addition to novitiate, juniorate and continued formation for the brothers. When I was assigned to Memphis, Tennessee 1971, where Catholics are a small minority (then less than 5%), I was the only acceptable Ph.D. in theology (the others in the diocese were former priests). This was a context where schools, clergy and the early generation of lay leadership all needed to be brought on board.

Specialization was a luxury that trained Catholic educators could not afford. In fact, even during graduate school, when I was working as a director of religious education in a New York parish and Lasallian school, I would fly back to the Midwest regularly to work with the visitor, Brother

This article was first published in 2011 in an Italian Lasallian journal entitled "Rivista Lasalliana." The editor of that journal, Brother Flavio Pajer, has given permission for us to publish the article here in *AXIS*.

John Johnston, to provide workshops for the brothers on the 16 documents of Vatican II and the 12 documents of the 39th General Chapter, especially the *Declaration*. Yes, Lasallian, Catholic and ecumenical renewal has been a challenging task and rich blessing since the Council's call in 1959, my year of graduation from the scholasticate.

These very personal reflections will touch on three points: 1) my own catechetical calling, 2) Lasallian catechetical identity, and 3) the present moment in the Church's catechetical mission in the United States.

1. Reflections on My Own Personal Catechetical Ministry

I have returned (in 2005) to the classroom after 24 years of a more specialized Lasallian catechetical ministry: ecumenical formation, research and administration. It is great, again, to be applying my learnings, both grassroots and research, in an environment characterized by the Lasallian values of justice, community and faith, in an ecumenically oriented Protestant seminary in the religiously conservative south of the United States. I have been teaching for a year at the Franciscan faculty in the Graduate Theological Union in California, but I am professor at Memphis Theological Seminary of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, which serves 30 denominations, 45% African American, 30% women. In the 1970s, it offered a Master of Arts in Roman Catholic Studies before our Christian Brothers College became a University. I also teach in the latter's Master of Arts in Catholic Studies.

My Journey

The relevance of my comments is both a witness to the zeal and passion for Christian learning engendered by Alphonsus and other Lasallians and a comment on strategies for implementing a Lasallian vision in our U.S. cultural context.

All of our students worldwide of whatever religious background will live in a pluralistic world, no matter how homogeneous our school or parish. The Catholic Church is irreversibly committed to the full visible unity of the Christian Churches. The late Pope John Paul challenged us with the **catechetical task** of making the last 45 years of ecumenical progress a "common heritage."⁴ I have been blessed to serve the Lasallian catechetical enterprise from the specialty of ecumenical formation within our larger Lasallian and ecclesial calling.

When we graduated from Saint Mary's University in 1959, some of us were energized by the commitment to bring the worship and social justice dimensions of Catholic catechesis alive. We found that this vision was yet to be shared by all Lasallians. My master's work was done under Brother Alphonsus on liturgical catechesis for high school *Living With Christ* texts in the early 60s, still pre-Vatican II.⁵

From this high school teaching in the 1960s, I was called by the visitor to change disciplines into theology at the time of the Council, and eventually into college teaching, which expanded into catechist, deacon, lay ecclesial ministry and Protestant seminary formation. My catechetical formation specialized in liturgical education. My theological work was first in sacramental theology and then in interdisciplinary work with sociology and theology, focusing on ecclesiology.

In building a new diocese, in Memphis, Tennessee in the 1970s, it fell to me to take up the ecumenical leadership, since there were already competent catechists, liturgists and social justice workers at the service of the diocese. After ten years of college teaching and service to the local church in Memphis, following a suggestion by the brother visitor, I was called in 1981 to minister in theological administration at the U.S. National Council of Churches in New York, where I served the U.S. ecumenical dialogues and followed the World Council dialogues as an observer.

In 1991, I was called to work with the U.S. bishops, for 14 years, also in an ecumenical capacity: administering dialogues, helping educators and other colleagues in the ecumenical dimension of their work, monitoring Vatican and World Council dialogue progress, and following developments among the churches, especially in the Latin American church. In this work I found marvelous Lasallian hospitality and collegiality around the world. Indeed, from Rhodes to Kuala Lumpur, from Porto Alegre to Newcastle there were always Lasallians to receive me, which would amaze my Orthodox and Protestant colleagues; and more important there were Lasallian catechetical and pastoral experiences on the ground to fill out the ecumenical learning of the scholars who serve the churches' unity with their research and dialogue.

One of my more recent publications uses exactly the same model used for those 1960s liturgy lessons I did for my master's thesis under Alphonsus: providing busy catechists with primary texts (in *this* case ecumenical), organized around the themes (in *that* case the lectionary – in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*).⁶ If catechists are to teach the results of the dialogues to make them a common heritage, as Pope John Paul recommends, these technical theological texts must be harvested in such a form that they can become “teachable” resources. Since the publication of this project, Cardinal Walter Kasper has promoted the “harvesting” of the 45 years of dialogue as a Catholic ecumenical priority.⁷

I use this illustration from my own story to make four points: a) the importance of adapting the resources of the tradition to the experience and needs of catechists and their students; b) the enduring importance of quality content; c) the importance of not pitting the grassroots practicality and age-appropriate methodologies against the content of the faith; and d) the importance of persistence in catechetical renewal. These values apply to the liturgical, social, biblical and ecumenical aspects of our catechetical task and many other dimensions as well. They are all well attested in the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, if these are read in light of the imperatives of the present age.⁸

In the 1950s and early 1960s it seemed almost fruitless initiating high school students into the liturgical reforms: providing Masses facing them, teaching the lectionary each week, holding out the values of lay participation, even acknowledging the possibilities of vernacular liturgies in the future. Indeed, the majority of the Brothers were unsympathetic to what some of us were teaching. Yet these were the values of our Lasallian formation, and they have become priorities since the Council a few years later.

By Alphonsus pressing me to provide teachable, “bite sized” texts for the busy catechist, I learned that building a firm and deep foundation is key to the catechetical enterprise, even if it is not valued by all ecclesiastical leadership or even by many of the teachers themselves. Now we

provide ecumenical experiences; understanding of history, the sacraments and the core doctrines of our faith from an ecumenical point of view; and keep commitment to full communion on the horizon of our students' faith in the Church.

In serving the ecumenical catechetical dimension of the Lasallian vocation, I have found it remarkable how the magisterium and its directives for ecumenical formation reinforce the educational needs of the U.S. Church as documented by social science research. Sociologists identify four things young U.S. Catholic adults in this generation need in their formation: 1) knowledge of Vatican II (44% of confirmed non-Latino, and 68% of Latino Catholics claim not to have heard of the Council!); 2) preparation for Catholic identity in an ecumenical context; 3) adult faith formation; and 4) education for interfaith settings.⁹

It is essential to have a core of competent trained catechists with a strong faith and transparent zeal who can field the questions, provide the resources, and inform the authorities and parents as well as generate enthusiasm among the students. This was true of the liturgy in the 1950s and 1960s, social justice in the 1970s and 1980s, ecumenism in the 1980s and 1990s, and remains true for the Lasallian catechesis of the future.

In the 1970s, the leadership of the Regional Conference of the Christian Brothers for the United States and Anglo-phone Canada supplied input and advice on the bishops assigned to the Roman Synod on Catechesis, and on the *National (U.S.) Catechetical Directory*, through its committee on catechesis. Before the Synod, a brother visited each bishop who was elected to go to Rome, and shared the reflections of our students with them. This committee provided resources for training lay colleagues in the Lasallian vision of education before the region had programs of Lasallian formation available to the laity in our ministries. In recent years, much consultation has gone into the new *National Directory for Catechesis* and the *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* but without focused Lasallian input. Service of the poor remains a Lasallian priority, but seeing catechesis as central to the vocation of all Lasallians is still a challenge.

Many skilled catechists and potential Lasallian catechetical leaders have been called into administration. For many, this has been seen as an opportunity to widen the catechetical vision, build supportive faith communities, and to enable a strong commitment to recruiting all faculty, even in the secular disciplines, for the Lasallian Catholic mission of the school. For some, administration is an easier and a better supported ministry than that of religious education in the classroom.

Not all are called to second level catechetical leadership and very few of us are called to the sort of catechetical specialization I have experienced, but leadership, publication and specialization are all important services. Indeed, the Lasallian presence in the forefront of U.S. catechetical leadership that was the hallmark of the movement in the 1940s through the 1960s is hardly to be found today, save in the special role of Saint Mary's Press and the catechetical publications it provides.

Reception of the Council

Secondly, some of the current tensions in catechetical work in the U.S. are unfortunate, but inevitable dimensions of the reception of Vatican II. As with every council, the resistance,

reception and inculturation of all of the conciliar reforms vary. Certainly this was De La Salle's experience with the reception of the Council of Trent, and the contrast between his education at Saint Sulpice and that of some of his more "traditional," pre-Tridentine colleagues.

Many of our Catholic leaders, brothers included, did not have the theological background to understand the shifts of Vatican II. Many were overwhelmed by the concurrent social and sexual revolutions that occurred in the late 1960s in the U.S. on the heels of the Council, and some could not distinguish between them.

It was particularly difficult in the southern United States which so identified with the U.S. military and segregationist social policy and was surrounded by biblical fundamentalism. Certainly, De La Salle's France is an historical example of the slow process of reception, where the reform decrees of Trent were only promulgated with the 1801 Concordat with Napoleon, and the Gallican liturgy only suppressed finally in the late nineteenth century.¹⁰

I have tried to follow the reception of religious liberty and ecumenism in Latin America as closely as I can.¹¹ I received a Lilly grant for a study on Hispanic ecumenism, one which had a very intentional youth component.¹² The relationship of culture, religious freedom in Latin America, and education for pluralism in the Hispanophone community in the reception of the Council is little known and appreciated in North America, but very important for our catechetical ministry. Likewise, teaching Hispanic theology in a Protestant seminary is a priority, given the U.S. immigration debates and the global collaboration necessary for Christian ministry.

I find this gradual reception particularly evident in ecumenical catechesis.¹³ Many teachable moments in the last 45 years have given me splendid opportunities for interpreting the magisterial texts and ecumenical agreements: agreed texts on the sacraments, justification, authority, and history focal among them. It has also helped to affirm the grassroots developments in interchurch marriages, diocesan initiatives and ecumenical models for a variety of parish renewal programs. In the U.S., there are still those who do not see zeal for the unity of Christians as central to our catechetical ministry. As catechetical leaders, we learn as much from the students and grassroots catechists, from their challenges, attention to cultural shifts and needs and questions, as we do from the magisterium, the theological heritage, and – in my case – from the ecumenical research, agreements and international initiatives.

While we know that a robust and confident sense of Catholic identity is necessary to enter into dialogue and to be authentically an ecumenical Catholic, it has taken some time for this vision to inform Catholic catechesis.¹⁴ In the U.S., we have the particular challenge of a denominational understanding of the Church, on the one hand, that marginalizes truth claims, and a sectarian fundamentalism or integrism on the other, which sees ecumenism as a threat.¹⁵ While neither of these positions is the Roman Catholic understanding of Church and ecumenism, they have major cultural impacts on our students and people.

It is significant to note that both the grassroots sociological studies and the directions of the Holy See identify the same needs in different language:

- 1) Being clear about the core elements of the faith (Hierarchy of Truths)¹⁶

2) Being clear about the setting of boundaries (knowing common faith, differences, and results of the dialogues)¹⁷

3) Helping people interpret the elements of their faith and the moral teaching of the Church. For the Holy See's directives in ecumenical formation this interpretation also entails understanding the traditions of fellow Christians and their churches in the light of the hierarchy of truths, and the issues we now share and those that still divide us.¹⁸

Most pastoral agents are not able to keep up with the details of ecumenical progress. Therefore, a receptive spirituality and attentiveness to the lines of ecumenical development are needed to nourish the ecumenical ideals of the Church at every level. For this reason, when I was at the bishops' conference, we did our best never to turn down a bishop's request to provide a priests' retreat or a catechetical congress. The U.S. bishops' catechetical leadership and most of the publishers have been otherwise engaged in recent years, but I have been able to provide ecumenical catechetical resources through the National Conference on Catechetical Leadership, National Catholic Educational Association and Paulist Press – and on the Lasallian circuit, through the MEL series.¹⁹

I have also been blessed to edit major international and U.S. ecumenical research which has been sponsored by the Catholic Church and its ecumenical partners; to edit the results of dialogues with Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists, Reformed, the Peace Churches, Pentecostal, Baptist and U.S. African American churches; to write numerous articles attempting to make the results of this research available to the wider Christian community; and to teach seminars and courses adapting these results to the whole people of God.

Before we can provide “teachable” materials for our catechists we have needed: 1) to codify and publish the technical agreements; 2) to harvest and synthesize the theological results; and 3) to translate the implications of these agreements into sound pedagogical models. We have only begun this task of harvesting, translating and receiving these gifts of the Holy Spirit into Catholic catechetical life. I have also been called into leadership among the Catholic diocesan ecumenical officers, the Catholic Theological Society and most recently as president of the Society for Pentecostal Studies.

Finally, perseverance in the attentiveness to the needs of the people of God, a fidelity to our marvelous Lasallian Catholic heritage, and the horizon of the Holy Spirit's ever evolving future, makes the journey a most exciting pilgrimage. As the *Declaration* exhorts us:

Societies, like individuals, grow old and die once habits inherited from the past outweigh the will to renewal in the light of a twofold fidelity both to the institutions that sparked our origins and the demands of life today. In the long run the future of the Institute is in the hands of the Brothers. [and one might add: The future of Lasallian catechesis is in the hands of all Lasallians.] They must not wait for ready-made solutions from those in authority for the new problems that come from a world in evolution. (D 53:2)²⁰

Models like Brother Luke Salm, and the ever refreshing research of Brothers Michel Sauvage and Miguel Campos have provided continued enrichment on the pilgrimage.

2. Lasallians as Catechists by Vocation

Lasallians can be justly proud of a long heritage of U.S. catechetical leadership in the classroom, in special creative leadership, and in publication. Lasallians pioneered lay involvement in the catechetical movement and in lay theological education in the United States. New York District's Brothers Luke Salm and Stephan Sullivan were the first lay S.T.D. graduates of the Catholic University of America; Luke was the first lay member of the Catholic Theological Society and its first lay president. They were both involved in the renewal of catechesis and theology, even before the Second Vatican Council.

In U.S. history, schools have been a primary instrument of evangelization, as a prominent missiologist comments:

Many feel that the reason for the vitality of the U.S. church, which is not matched in any other industrialized nation, comes from the socialization – and we would add, evangelization – carried on through this school system. Today, in many of the poor sections of our cities, it is the Catholic schools that provide the hope of a better life for many children including those who are not Catholic.²¹

It is always important to recount the primacy of the catechetical mission in Lasallian identity: “The Brothers [today we would say Lasallians] make known the divine mysteries by exercising the ministry of the Word of God. The [Lasallians] are catechists by vocation; this is their ‘principal function.’” (D 38:1)

In this generation in the United States where in both secondary and tertiary education specialization is the order of the day, it is important to help lay Lasallians to understand how we are all called to embody this charism, whether in the religion classroom or not.²² The catechetical mission of the Brothers enables lay participation in the Church and Institute and empowers Lasallian leadership in catechesis, administration and education.²³ I have not been personally involved in this Lasallianization formation program, though we have provided some resources.²⁴ Brother Pérez Navarro's 10 challenges give a solid foundation for any Lasallian formation program.²⁵

The Lasallian educator, following De La Salle's directions in the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, identifies with students' struggles, their stage of development and the cultures from which they come, seeing Christ through the physical and cultural limitations of the children. Lasallians teach students first, and subject matter – including the conceptual dimension of the faith – second, depending very much on the stage, readiness and disposition of the student who is being accompanied. This often means that those who are driven to evaluate the Lasallian educational process by behavioral results and conceptual orthodoxy of doctrine are disappointed.

As one seasoned brother puts it:

Religious education purports, I believe, to create an awareness of the spiritual dimension of the human person and at a later time in life a person may even come to an appreciation for a particular religion and moral code to be lived by. He/she may even embrace a commitment to religion as a support to one's spiritual life. Religious education opens the student to an awareness of the possibility of a relationship with God, a higher being. Awareness of the spiritual can lead to a relational life. Relating to others and God through prayer, in its varieties, study, and service to others.

Characteristic of the charism of the Lasallian catechist are: a) a lay orientation, b) creative inculturation, c) the schools of whatever type as the preferred vehicle, and d) the option for the poor.

More challenging dimensions of the charism as we inherit the commitments of Vatican II are: a) the commitment to a critical service of the Church's wider mission beyond just the Lasallian school, b) the collaborative transition from a brother-centered to a Lasallian-centered catechetical identity, and c) a collegial style of mission in a Church centered on baptism and Eucharist, to which the ordained ministers and religious give appropriate – but not exclusive – service.²⁶

III. The Catechetical Situation in the U.S. Church Today

There are a variety of points of view on the present challenge. These are very personal observations about challenges faced by the U.S. Catholic catechetical community.

Future Trends

The Catholic catechetical future in the U.S., it seems to me, will be marked by:

- 1) Lay leadership
- 2) Informed by the Council
 - a) Christocentric: focusing on Christ and grace, the biblical message and the sacraments, the unity of Christians, recognizing the primary image of the Church as a community (*koinonia*) of the baptized – a pilgrim people
 - b) Oriented to the Church's mission in the world in proclamation, dialogue, social justice and service
 - c) Recognizing the centrality of the person; with the educators and church leadership, and the Christian heritage as resources for witnessing to the Gospel
- 3) Continued polarization in the interpretations of Vatican II
- 4) Parish and family rather than school centered, for demographic more than theological reasons.²⁷ Only 12% of young Catholics are in schools. While many Brothers have pioneered parish and diocesan ministries, some directing lay ecclesial ministry, campus ministry, liturgical and catechist formation programs, the majority of Lasallians find the

school the focus of ministry, as acknowledged in the *Declaration*. The Visitor General, Brother Erminus Joseph, used to remind us that De La Salle was always devoted to the local/diocesan church as he understood it. Many Lasallians extend their catechetical ministry beyond the school in these varieties of ministries. This has meant, however, that catechetical leadership has also shifted beyond the schools to those who have the whole Church and the majority of Catholics as their horizon. Saint Mary's Press has followed this shift effectively.

5) Multi-cultural, and therefore multi-ideological with a rich variety of Catholic spiritualities.

U.S. Cultural Context

The Catholic Church in the U.S., it seems to me, will be marked by these *continuing realities*:

- 1) Continued clerical governance structures, even as the quantity and quality control of the ordained decreases
- 2) Increased emphasis on discipleship, parish community and recognition of a diversity of family situations
- 3) Decreased religious literacy on the part of Catholics and other Christians.²⁸ Of course, over-simplified sociological surveys need to be used critically.²⁹ However, some studies have shown Catholics among the weakest U.S. religious bodies in their teen religious education. In the U.S., belief is strong, unlike the European situation. However, institutional commitment is weakening, so loyalty to the churches is often secondary in the popular piety of many. Parents' religion is a greater predictor of religious knowledge and practice than parish or school.

To what extent might this be due to the shift from school based to parish based catechesis without the concomitant shift of resources or pastoral priority setting? Certainly the transitions of the 1960s and 1970s, and the continuing polarization in the institutional church, are also factors.

The 1992 publication of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)* and the subsequent initiative of the U.S. bishops to implement the *CCC* by monitoring textbook publishers was seen by the bishops as a way of dealing with this religious illiteracy. However, it has also enhanced the polarization of catechetical emphases in this country, and often placed teachers and schools in the midst of tensions.³⁰ As one Lasallian puts it: "it was impossible to escape the reality that the [U.S. Catholic] Church was undergoing a major cultural shift on the same scale of what it had experienced in the postconciliar years – but in the opposite direction."³¹ Some suggest that the concern about censoring textbooks might be better placed in encouraging attendance at parish religious education, and in quality adult faith formation for parents and catechists.

Lasallian catechists and institutions are not absent from these tensions. In the larger Lasallian picture, the option for the school as the privileged focus of our catechetical

ministry in the Church challenges us to face the building of a faith community beyond the religious education program or the catechetical curriculum. Lasallian Shirley Kelter notes about the mission of Saint Mary's Press: "We felt that while SMP might produce wonderful textbooks, if there wasn't a sense of faith community in the schools, the books weren't going to build faith in the students."³²

4) Increased intellectual (but not necessarily religious) sophistication among Catholic elites. Some of the disaffiliation with the institution may come from the disconnect between the education of some church members and the quality of some Catholic leadership.

5) Receding experience of, and possibly even knowledge of, Vatican II by Catholics and even some of their leadership.³³

6) Decreased ethnocentric cultural Catholicism and increased "denominational" cultural Christian Catholicism, and consequent continued drain of Catholics to the right and left into communities where they feel "more comfortable."³⁴ This polarization in society, reflected in the churches, is often characterized as the "culture wars." One can see this in the selective support of Catholic teaching on sexuality on the one hand, or on the Gulf Wars and immigration on the other. Even the bishops show divided public strategies on some of these issues.

7) The universal-Catholic vision in ecclesial, political, economic and social life is becoming increasingly marginal to the individual Catholic. Their own particular parish and understanding of their Catholic identity is the point of view through which they view their church commitment and Christian values. The difference between the Catholic bishops and their people on the Mexican immigration debate following the regional economic restructure of the North American Free Trade Agreement (1993) is a current example.

8) Continuing encroachment of the anti-intellectualism of American culture into Catholic life, even for the devout. Piety may continue to outweigh a serious attention to the content of the faith and the quest for a deeper, critical knowledge of the tradition.

9) As to the theological and pastoral competence of those being appointed bishops, the future is not at all clear. The ecumenical work is made more challenging in the U.S. because of the number and prominence of bishops appointed on the basis of their service in the Roman Curia rather than demonstrated pastoral competence in the local church they are called to serve.

The polarization caused by the variety of interpretations of Vatican II will continue for many years, as will the traditional and necessary tensions about emphases on method and/or content in catechesis; propositional vs. relational emphases in our understanding of revelation; and approaches to dealing with religious and theological pluralism. These strains in our catechetical mission can be seen as God-given opportunities for deepening our skills at dialogue and our quest for more knowledge of the tradition in our Lasallian identity as "catechists by vocation."³⁵

Lasallian Challenges

Some *implications* for Lasallian catechetical leadership in the U.S. seem to me:

1) In the new, lay catechetical context, Lasallian leaders (principals, directors of parish religious education, department chairs, university presidents, etc.) will need to be more **theologically trained** because there are no religious community structures of formation, support and continuing education.

In the U.S. the catechist's position is subject to the change of pastor, principal, or bishop, no matter what the competence, qualifications, contractual agreements or lack thereof, that are in place. The positions of Lasallian school teachers are more secure, but there need to be leaders in the schools skillful enough to **manage conflicts** with parents, diocese and local clergy, and to recruit and retain competent religious educators.

Therefore, there need to be **support structures** provided for those with the catechetical vocation: spiritual, economic and political; so that lay catechists can minister with security, hope and enrichment. This will entail support systems enabled by the Lasallian system and its mission and ministry councils. These are newly forming in the U.S. and their leadership is yet to be tested. It will also entail Lasallian structures which will recruit, provide for the training, gather and advocate for Lasallian catechists in the Lasallian systems and in the Church.

The catechetical leader needs to know as much if not more than the bishop or clergy about handing on the tradition, in order to make clear the position of the Church, and to be able to clarify where programs serving the particular needs of students are supported in the magisterium and tradition.

In the U.S. there are many good textbook resources out there as Peter Steinfels comments.³⁶ The major question will be: do we have the competent educators who have both the pedagogical expertise and the theological knowledge to adapt the message to the needs of the people being served? Do we have vehicles for bringing adults and young people into a context where there can be a credible witness to the tradition?

Most of our U.S. Lasallian Catholic colleges and universities were founded to train prospective brothers, including training in their catechetical vocation. When scholasticates disappeared from campus, often the professional **catechetical formation** programs dried up as well, sometimes because of survival, marketing and cultural forces, rather than through specific missional decisions. A number of our universities provide teacher training programs and a number have graduate programs for teachers and administrators. Some of these are targeted for Catholic schools, but many are focused primarily on public (state – secular) schools because that is where the market is and where most jobs are. In some of these cases, collaboration with the religion departments are difficult since public school culture is very different than parish and Catholic school educational culture, and many states do not provide certification for religion since it is not taught in the public schools.

Likewise, when the residential religious market dried up, many of the theology or catechetical masters' degree programs were terminated in Lasallian universities as well. It is encouraging to see some of our U.S. Lasallian universities reviving or initiating programs designed specifically for lay ecclesial ministers and catechists of the future.³⁷

It has been my point of view for years that we should be no less rigorous in our selection of catechists in Lasallian schools than in the selection of science or language teachers. However, our systems, Lasallian or academic, need to be as intentional about the **recruiting, training and support** of these prospective catechists as we once were for religious. The U.S. Church leadership provides a disproportionate set of resources for clerical formation, often in isolation from lay ecclesial ministers in formation; compared with the resources allocated for the formation of Catholic educators.

In the U.S., we are still benefiting from the residual religious, the former priests and religious who have continued their catechetical calling while changing their vocational life style; and from schools with theologically formed and catechetically experienced administrators at the helm. We are now challenged to ask how we can project the next twenty years to see that these dedicated catechists are succeeded by people of equal competence who can be as intentionally supported and mentored into Lasallian catechetical leadership.

As Brother Álvaro says, "Looking over our three-hundred years of history, we come across the fact that our Founder dedicated himself more to teacher formation than to the direct education of children."³⁸ It will be useful to reflect on the implications of this fact for our Lasallian life and future.

2) The governance structures in the Church will call for deeper sensitivity and **collaboration** on the part of educators, especially those who are catechetically trained. The bishop has the canonical responsibility as teacher in the local church. The called, trained and experienced catechist has the pedagogical charism. The wisest bishops are those who inform their responsibilities with the wisdom and experience of those who do the work of handing on the faith.

It is instructive to see Brother Alvaro holding up the Latin American bishops' models for evangelization education rather than some operative in the U.S. bishops' conference, or even emphases evident in some Vatican documents.³⁹

There are stories of how parishes, schools and programs across the U.S. have been changed with the change of leadership. We need to find ways of building roots for quality Lasallian catechetical programs so that they can endure the ups and downs of changes in clerical leadership and pressures that these bring on catechists.

Lasallian catechists, when they have developed security and seasoning, have important resources to **share with dioceses and parishes**, not to mention national structures – of the Lasallian networks and of the Church. In the U.S., we need to learn how appropriate

leadership is exercised in a clerically governed, often polarized, Church by competent and visionary Lasallian catechists.

3) Catechesis for the future will continue to work in an environment that is increasingly **pluralistic** for the students and their families. As Brother Álvaro notes, ecumenical and interreligious dialogue are key elements in Lasallian pedagogy.⁴⁰

However, possibly more urgent is the dialogue within the Church, with its variety of cultures, interpretations of Vatican II, and expectations of the catechetical programs. With the increasing new U.S. Hispanic populations as well as the regional, ideological, economic and cultural diversities traditional in our American multicultural Church, we are challenged not to allow our Lasallian catechetical programs to become the captive of devotional or ideological preferences of particular dimensions of Catholic life.

Ecumenical formation is particularly urgent in the U.S. Hispanic community and among recent immigrants from Eastern Europe. Newcomers may be dealing with pluralism for the first time. We will need to help them understand how to move beyond popular religion as the primary vehicle for handing on the faith and reliance on a cultural hegemony often presumed from countries of origin, to an informed and articulate faith that is personal and internalized. Commitment to the Catholic community will need to become a conscious decision and not something for which the culture or the hierarchy is primarily responsible.

We have to interpret and help students interpret to one another the rich variety of forms of Catholicism, not to mention the variety of Christian churches with which we share communion – even if yet imperfect, and those of other faiths with whom we must work out our common life in society.

4) Finally, a realistic **historical perspective** is an important resource in Lasallian spiritual lives. We are a few years away from Vatican II and the General Chapters since the 39th, so their catechetical and Lasallianization ideals are only slowly filtering into the lives of our people and institutions. De La Salle and his mentors at Saint-Sulpice were among the French minority leadership who supported the reforms of the Council of Trent. He served with many bishops and fellow clergy who were quite resistant to these changes, and were quite comfortable with the leadership and the Gallican principles of the French church and Louis XIV. We need to see the touching of the hearts and minds of each individual in each class as building the ground work for the future of the Church. Yet we know that each era of reform, each council, and each movement – like the Lasallian movement – has had its ups and downs, its gradual process of reception; a reception that entailed many rejections along the way. Therefore, the Lasallian catechist is sustained by the Holy Spirit in his or her vocation, and not deterred by the challenges placed before us in our educational task.

When, in my ecumenical work, ministers are discouraged by the volume of ignorance they encounter among the people, pews to bishops, I can only say that this ignorance is a verification of our calling to educate the Church to its heritage and its calling to unity,

and the theological and pastoral resources we have for responding to Christ's prayer that they all may be one.

The Lasallian calling to handing on the faith, especially with the poor with special preference for schools, is a noble and challenging vocation. I have found all of its aspects fascinating in my calling, often mirroring De La Salle's view of providence – recognizing God's gradual hand only in retrospect at the end of his life. For me it has moved from a beginning in science to theological study and a life of implementing the Council; through specialization in ecumenical formation and theological dialogue; to a return to the classroom in these last years. All contributing to an ever deepening faith in God's Word and call to a united Church, and zeal for sharing this faith and pilgrimage with every new generation of young and adult Christians.⁴¹

De La Salle's *Method of Interior Prayer* has been a great source of support in discerning God's presence in the events of life, the calling of the Lasallian vocation, and the needs of the Church as the pilgrimage of history moves forward. Revitalized biblical scholarship, the call to see God acting in the divided Christian churches and in the events of the world, and the renewed sacramental sensibilities which came with the midcentury liturgical reforms, have all provided us with rich resources for helping fill out De La Salle's multi-act, disciplined approach to listening to God's action through the signs of the times, the hopes and joys of the human community, and the love of God for and presence with all of his creation. The *Method* is an intentional, action oriented discernment process, easily adapted with the resources of modern psychology and social analysis, informed by contemporary theology and cosmology. An understanding of the rich contemplative resources of the Eastern religions demonstrated De La Salle's great insight in developing a prayer life through imagination, rational simplicity to a simple attention, a mindfulness of God's absolute presence in every aspect of life.⁴²

Notes

1. Brother Jeffrey Gros, FSC, (1938-2013) was a Distinguished Professor of Ecumenical and Historical Theology at Memphis Theological Seminary. He served a year as Kenan Osborne visiting professor at Franciscan School, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California. He was president of the Society for Pentecostal Studies. He taught secondary school biology for seven years, served ten years as Director of Faith and Order for the National Council of Churches in the USA, and then 14 years as Associate Director of the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, in addition to 15 years of seminary and university teaching. He served as Dean for the Catholic Institute for Ecumenical leadership, a program for diocesan ecumenical officers. He received a Bachelor of Arts degree and a Masters (Biology Education) degree from Saint Mary's University of Minnesota. He earned a master's degree from Marquette University and a Ph.D. in theology from Fordham University.

2. Brother Raphael Erler, *Beginnings: The Founding of Saint Mary's Press: Winds of Change* (Winona: Saint Mary's Press, 1993). See also Jerry Windley-Daoust, *Touching the Hearts of Teens: Saint Mary's Press, 1943 – 2001* (Winona: Saint Mary's Press, 2009).

3. Erler, *Winds*, 8-10, 13-23. See also Franz Posset, *American Catechetics: Personal and Secular* (Winona: Saint Mary's College Press, 1969).

4. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jpii_enc_25051995_ut-unum-sint_en.html.

5. Erler, *Winds*, 4-6, 11.

6. Daniel Mulhall, Jeffrey Gros, eds., *The Ecumenical Christian Dialogues and the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 2006).

7. Walter Kasper, *Harvesting the Fruits: Basic Aspects of Christian Faith in Ecumenical Dialogue* (New York: Continuum, 2009).

8. John Baptist de La Salle, *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* (Romeville, IL: Christian Brothers Conference, 1975).

9. Dean Hoge, et al., *Young Adult Catholics: Religion in the Culture of Choice* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 146.

10. I took a 2006 Lasallian pilgrimage through southern France, retracing the Founder's steps of his late-life discernment retreat in order to reflect on the transitions, calling and steps to be taken in my own life. This occurred as the Church, Institute and U.S. ecumenical context moved forward in its challenge to incarnate the vision of the Church renewed by the Council. I drew on Lasallian spiritual resources to renew and rededicate my own spiritual life to faith in the Church's ideals and to zeal for the Institute's service of this mission of education, unity and service. I remain grateful to both the Lasallian hospitality and readings that continue to sustain me as the transition continues. It was at Parmenie that I began to read and reflect on the contributions of Brother Robert Comte.

11. Cf. articles by Jeffrey Gros, "Struggle and Reconciliation: Some Reflections on Ecumenism in Chile," *International Review of Mission* 97: 384 (January/April 2008). "The Challenge of Pluralism and Peace: The Changing Relationships among the Churches in Colombia," *International Review of Mission* (August/October 2009). "Ecumenism in the Western Hemisphere: The Witness of the Catholic Synod," *Ecumenical Review* 51:4 (October, 1999). "Koinonia in America," *One in Christ* 36 (2000). Also Philippe Thibodeau, Florencio Galindo, Jeffrey Gros, eds., "The 1997 Roman Catholic Synod for America: Ecumenical Perspectives," *Ecumenism* 32:127 (September 1997).

12. Jeffrey Gros, "Reconciliation and Hope: The Contribution of the U.S. Hispanic Community: Recovering a Reconciling Heritage I, Building A Common Future II," *Ecumenical Trends* 35:10, 11 (November, December, 2006) 1 – 6.

13. Without going into a lengthy discussion of ecumenical formation, one U.S. statistic that indicates how far we have to go in this dimension of catechesis is the figure that 48% of confirmed non-Latino, and 64% of Latino Catholics believe that “the Catholic Church is the one true Church,” a position that was definitively put aside in 1964 for the affirmation that the one true Church “subsists in” the Catholic Church. See Hoge, 57.

14. Ibid., 238. As sociologists note: “. . . the Church cannot function as a lazy monopoly . . . Catholicism will need to present itself as distinct, vital, relevant, and worthwhile – as a living tradition of discipleship, community, and sacramental consciousness.” In the debate on Religious Freedom in the Council, several Latin American fathers and Yves Congar recognized the catechetical challenge of the new image of society being proposed for the Catholic Church.

15. Jeffrey Gros, “Reception in American Culture: Tendencies and Temptations”, in *Twelve Tales Untold: A Study Guide for Ecumenical Reception*, edited by John T. Ford and Darlis J. Swan, 1993.

16. Ibid., 196, 208. Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, “The Ecumenical Dimension in the Formation of Pastoral Workers,” *Origins* 27:39 (March 19, 1998), 653-661. # 12. (hereafter EF)

17. Hoge, 205, EF # 13, 16-19.

18. Hoge, 198, EF # 11, 25-26.

19. Jeffrey Gros, *Handing on the Faith in an Ecumenical World: Resources for Catholic Administrators and Religious Educators In Serving Christian Unity in School and Parish*, (Washington, DC: National Catholic Educational Association, 2005). *That All May Be One: Ecumenism* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 2000). “The Ecumenical Component to Catholic Identity in Higher Education,” Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities (Washington, DC: January, 2002).

20. De La Salle Christian Brothers, *A Declaration: The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today* (Lincroft, NJ: La Salle Provincialate, 1997, original 1967). #38:1 (hereafter D)

21. Robert Schreiter, CPPS, “The New Evangelization,” in Steven Bevans, SVD, Roger Schroeder, SVD, eds., *Word Remembered, Word Proclaimed* (Nettetal: Steyler Verlag, 1997), 52.

22. John Baptist de La Salle, *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* (Romeville, IL: Christian Brothers Conference, 1975). Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría, “Associated with the God of the Kingdom and the Kingdom of God: Ministers and Servants of the Word.” (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, December 25, 2004). (hereafter A)

23. Kevin M. Tidd, O.S.B , “The Evolution of ‘Association’ as a Model for Lay/Religious Collaboration in Catholic Education, Part I: From ‘One and Only Masters’ to the Lasallian Family, 1719-1986; Part II: The Emergence of Shared Mission as a Ministry Paradigm, 1986-

2000.” *Catholic Education: a Journal of Inquiry and Practice* 12 (March, 2009), pp. 320-338, 13 (June 2009), pp. 439-456.

24. Jeffrey Calligan, Carl Koch, Jeffrey Gros, eds., *John Baptist de La Salle: The Spirituality of Christian Education* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2004). Jeffrey Gros, *Lasallian Ministry and the Unity of Christians* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2004).

25. José Pérez Navarro. FSC. *The Teaching of Catechism in Lasallian History* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2005, (MEL Bulletin 17), 64. <http://www.lasalle2.org/English/Resources/Publications/PDF/Education/Cahier17.pdf>.

26. This is not the place to go into how De La Salle’s theology of the Church and the human person, unpopular in Gallican Jansenist France, served to save the Institute in 1801 and 1904. See Pedro Maria Gil, *Three Centuries of Lasallian Identity* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1998).

27. Catholic schools in the U.S. are totally funded from the voluntary contributions of believers, so it is always a challenge to keep a focus on the Lasallian option for the poor. In the nineteenth century, the Church decided to give a priority to parish schools, usually staffed by religious, frequently concentrated in ethnic neighborhoods inhabited by immigrants. These communities were very generous in support of their schools which were protectors of both religious and national heritage. With the suburbanization, acculturation and affluence of Catholic communities, there has been less attention to Catholic schools, so they are no longer the vehicles of Catholic identity or primary sources for passing on the Catholic heritage that they once were. The liturgy, parish educational programs and other forms of outreach must carry this educational task for the majority of Catholics.

28. Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know--And Doesn't* (New York: HarperOne, 2008).

29. See Christian Smith, et al., *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 65, 193-217. For a more nuanced and detailed exploration of this theme, see Hoge.

30. Windley-Daoust, 149 -164. See also Jeffrey Gros, FSC, with Steven Bevans, SVD, *Evangelization and Religious Freedom: Ad Gentes, Dignitatis Humanae* (New York: Paulist Press, 2008), 228 -234.

31. Windley-Daoust, 162, 203 - 207.

32. Ibid., 175.

33. Hoge, 146.

34. Hoge and his sociological colleagues identify this as a “culture of choice.” See also Thomas Rausch, *Being Catholic in a Culture of Choice* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2006).

Catholicism is the largest Church in the United States, but it is a minority among Christians. Protestantism is represented by a wide variety of churches, some ecumenical and committed to unity with the Catholic Church, other sectarian and anti-ecumenical. Ecumenism itself means different things for different Christian groups, both those who are committed to the ecumenical movement and those who oppose it.

35. See Bradford E. Hinze, *Practices of Dialogue in the Roman Catholic Church: Aims and Obstacles, Lessons and Laments* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 21-25. Also see U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, *National Directory for Catechesis* (Washington, DC: U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005).

36. Peter Steinfels, *A People Adrift: The Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003).

37. One example is Lewis University (<http://www.lewisu.edu/>). Lewis has a full Pastoral Ministry formation program. Of course, Lasallian Universities are not the only creative initiatives for lay catechists underway. Universities like Dayton, Marquette, Boston College etc. have shown important leadership. Gerald Baumbach's program at Notre Dame for prospective religious educators, ECHO, is particularly instructive: <http://www.nd.edu/~cci/>.

38. Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría, "Associated with the God of the Kingdom and the Kingdom of God: Ministers and Servants of the Word." (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, December 25, 2004), 5.

39. Ibid., 44.

40. Cf. Hoge, 143.

41. Jeffrey Gros, "A People on Pilgrimage – In Christ's Prayer," *Ecumenical Trends* 37:11 (December 2008) 1-4; "The Ecumenical Calling of the Academic Theologian to Spiritual Pilgrimage in Service of Gospel Unity," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 44:3 (Summer, 2009); "The Unity of Christians: The United States Catholic Witness." *U.S. Catholic Historian* 26:2 (Spring 2010).

42. Miguel Campos and Michel Sauvage, *Encountering God in the Depths of the Mind and Heart* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1995).

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