

Mass to Celebrate the Tercentenary of the Death of St John Baptist De La Salle

(21 May 2019)

Context

Who shapes our imagination? If you're thinking Pixar & Marvel Studios then its Walt Disney. Social Media? Mark Zuckerberg & Steve Jobs. (Ok, Larry Page & Sergei Brin for Google also deserve a mention). Social Justice causes? The environment and matters of sexuality.

And the very purpose of life, God and Heaven? Is it the Jesus we read about in the Gospels and encounter in the sacraments that structure the Catholic Church? Increasingly the answer is "no" and we are witnessing the rise of young males without hope and a constant dread for a future that will end in relationship failure, a meaningless job, and ultimate ecological collapse.

As a bishop, a successor to the Apostles who were sent out to give the good news of Jesus Christ, that alarms me. Our schools have great potential to bring the saving message of the Gospel to new generations of Aussies (and Kiwis) – a few years ago I celebrated baptism and confirmation for a dozen young fellows at my old school, De La Salle Mangere. In front of a thousand of their peers they had no trouble saying "Yes bishop, I am present bishop." A good teacher can hand on a sure basis for fraternity, service, and compassion that is grounded in Christian hope. But how can you follow in the Lasallian tradition without faith and practice of the faith? Indeed, without some men who dedicate their entire lives through a vocation of celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of heaven?

This Tercentenary celebration not only marks the 300th anniversary of the Death of St John Baptist De La Salle, Founder of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools (1719-2019), it has also been termed The Year of Lasallian Vocations. What a difference you can make to an entire generation as a brother. We remember our teachers - as I remember Brother Ray, Brother David, and Brother Pat. People for whom Christ is alive, who speak with Him in prayer. And as a brother who prays you help turn *doomers* and *zoomers* into Christian men and women.

"You can perform miracles in regard both yourselves and your work by an entire fidelity to grace, not letting any movement of grace go by without corresponding with it; and by touching the hearts of children entrusted to your care," (J.B. De La Salle, *Meditation* 180.3)

Life and Works of St John Baptist de la Salle (1651 - 1719)

The saints capture and shape our imagination. Each has his or her own personality but they all follow Jesus Christ very closely. In the case of St John Baptist we meet a man who had a good head start in life, born to wealthy parents in France and assured of his future situation by the time he hit 16 by joining the seminary. It was when both his parents died, four years later, that he had to leave the Cathedral to look after all his siblings and manage his family's affairs. This was particularly hard for John Baptist who really believed God had been calling him to the Seminary and to become a priest. He seemed to suffer from a deep uncertainty about God's call for his life – a path that seemed so clear to him, was obscured by family responsibilities and troubles. This will be true for all of you too. Along with your dreams comes the reality of everyday difficulties that we should face up to with prayer, wise counsel and, above all, the endurance to stick it out.

With the support of many great spiritual advisors, and his own persistence in prayer and work for others, St John Baptist de la Salle found the strength and insight to cope with the circumstances of his situation and grow in his understanding of God. He wrote later in life, “God, who conducts all things with wisdom and gentleness...(worked with me) in an almost imperceptible manner over a long period of time...”

He was finally able to be ordained a priest and by age 30 received a doctorate in theology. With all that God had given him, He used his talents to found a brotherhood of lay men who lived their lives in service of the Christian education of poor boys. De La Salle's 'Christian schools' were free and open to all, especially the poor. The school's atmosphere of firmness and kindness instilled a sense of purpose into the lives of young people so accustomed to roaming the streets in poverty.

De La Salle was an innovator, a disruptor. Not only did he personally give away his wealth to the poor, above all he pioneered an education taught in the local native language of French, rather than Latin, that made schooling possible for huge numbers of poor families.

At his death, there were 100 Brothers in 22 schools, teaching 5000 students throughout France. Today, thanks to this Patron Saint of all those who work in Education, there are over 5,000 Brothers and many thousands of lay partners who continue in the De La Salle tradition. They minister to more than 900,000 students in universities, schools and other educational and welfare institutions in over 80 countries around the world: Papua New Guinea, Pakistan, Palestine ...

Last week, Pope Francis, in an address to the Lasallians on the occasion of the tercentenary, praised St John Baptist de la Salle as “a pioneer in the field of education, who created an innovative education system for his time.” Pope Francis urged the Brothers of the Christian Schools to “imitate his (de la Salle’s) passion for the least and discarded” and to contrast the culture of death with a “culture of the resurrection” – a fitting parallel to the “culture of life”, coined by St John Paul II.

In speaking to the Brothers, Pope Francis said: “Never tire of seeking those who find themselves in the modern ‘graves’ of bewilderment, degradation, discomfort, and poverty, to offer hope for a new life.”

The Way Ahead

“Sir” Brother Patrick Lynch, (he and I are from the same home town of Papatoetoe), has done a lot for Catholic education in New Zealand. From its beginnings, in good-will but inadequate foundations – poorly resourced and overcrowded – he guided everyone into collaboration with each other, the State, and business, “rattling cages” and overcoming the pettiness and lethargy that marks sclerotic bureaucracies. Equity does not mean mediocrity and he would always strive for excellence. No mean feat as I have shared a few amusing stories with Brother David about some of the classes and teachers during my time at Mangere East.

What about this generation? You guys?

I’ll tell you an open secret. In this age we need faith-filled English teachers. Good RE teachers, yes. Good historians, also. But it is through the English departments that the moral narratives which shape our societies are formed. From Shakespeare to Les Murray you can learn about our human struggle within a Christian world view, where grace and hope abound.

Please God, whatever career you embark upon, it will be in the Lasallian tradition – with a practical concern for the poor, the spiritually and morally poor too, open to God’s grace and led by Jesus Christ.