

Lasallian Reflection

WHAT WILL YOU DO THIS SUMMER?

June 2019 – Br. George Van Grieken, FSC



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I do not like to make the first move in any endeavor. ... I leave it to Divine Providence to make the first move and then I am satisfied. When it is clear that I am acting only under the direction of Providence, I have nothing to reproach myself with. When I make the first move, it is only I myself who am active, so I don't expect to see much good result; neither does God usually give the action his special blessing.

- St. John Baptist de La Salle ¹

De La Salle's life sparkled with a radical adherence to Divine Providence – the conviction that God speaks to us through people, circumstances, events, and requests that arise in the course of our daily affairs; not fate, luck, happenstance, or coincidence, but God's invitations to move in a certain direction, do a certain thing, respond in a certain way. It's like the gaze of a young child towards its parent, acutely conscious of the many ways concern, direction, interest, and care are communicated non-verbally. It is the language of loving attention, of contemplation.

Yet there is another piece that might be easily overlooked; i.e., he knew that you actually have to do something in order to learn something; you actually have to act in order to move forward. One of the striking things about De La Salle is that he acted, he responded. He did not just think "Oh, boy. I better do something about this sometime." Instead, he listened carefully, prayed deeply, thought fervently, consulted widely, concluded courageously, and acted confidently.

¹ De La Salle, John Baptist. *The Letters*. Translated by Colman Molloy, FSC. Edited by Colman Molloy and Augustine Loes. Romeoville, IL: Lasallian Publications, 1988. Pg. 75

This combination of radical trust and conscious action—of faith and zeal if you will—is worth paying attention to vis-à-vis our contemporary engagement with the Christian tradition. A few years ago, *America* magazine had a book review that disagreed with the book’s substance but also admitted that the thing the author got right was “... his steady insistence that in order to be Christians today—to bear the name of Christ in truth as well as in title—we must relearn two things: practices and disciplines. ... [W]hen it comes to the question of how we build Christian persons, how we become Christians in habit as well as in mind, ‘what we think does not matter as much as what we do—and how faithfully we do it.’”² The shivering importance of this emphasis on practices can be better seen when we notice that we are, all of us, being formed by the things we do every day. As the philosopher Will Durant put it in his one-line-synthesis of Aristotle: ‘We are what we repeatedly do.’ And what do we do every day? We check our phones; we watch our televisions; we drive our cars. We perform these ‘cultural liturgies,’ as James K.A. Smith names them, by rote. They sink so deeply into us that they become muscle memory. It is these repeated actions that shape our habits, our habits that shape our character, our characters that shape our tastes and our tastes that shape ourselves.”³

It is a long quotation, but every word speaks to our capacity to be aware of God’s Providence. Can the language of mutual loving attention with God survive amidst the habits that are our second nature? Do we have *any* habits that resonate with God or God’s life in our midst? God’s providential care warrants a cultivated capacity to habitually engage that presence. But this is not very easy today. According to another author, “the convergence of two major trends in our own time calls for a new assessment of the barriers of faith. ... These two major trends are (1) the practice of continuous engagement in immediately gratifying activities that resist reflection and meditation, and (2) the growth of secularism, defined as a state in which theism is seen as one of the many visible choices for human fullness and satisfaction, and in which the transcendent feels less and less plausible.”⁴ His proposed solution is the title of his book.

De La Salle’s combination of praying and doing, trusting and acting, faith and zeal, was just as difficult in his own time as it is today. Then as now, you can’t simply think your way to salvation. If we live in a time where our attention is structured by largely unconscious habits introduced and shaped by popular culture, then it makes sense to 1) be aware of that dynamic in our lives, 2) find opportunities to step behind and beyond such habits, and 3) include a few practices and disciplines that resonate with our faith-informed convictions. Without such plain and simple measures, Thoreau’s “life of quiet desperation” remains the default ungraced option for most.

So what will you do this summer?

² Dreher, Rod. *The Benedict Option: a Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation*. Sentinel, an Imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 2018. Pg. 52.

³ Gilger, Patrick. *America Magazine*. April 17, 2017. “Navigating the Benedict Option” Pg. 20.

⁴ Noble, Alan. *Disruptive Witness: Speaking Truth in a Distracted Age*. InterVarsity Press, 2018. Pg. 2