



Presented at the DLSU Research Congress 2019
De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines
June 19 to 21, 2019

Lasallian Discernment: A Communal Reflection Method

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Abstract: Can one speak of Lasallian discernment as distinct from Ignatian discernment? Despite not being a household term, Lasallian discernment does exist with its own method and criteria. Through a critical analysis and reflection, this paper would like to present Lasallian discernment as a distinct method in discerning God's will. An essential feature of Lasallian discernment is the focus is on the vocational and social environment of the discerner in contrast to the Ignatian discernment of spirits that is ultimately focused on the interior movements of the individual discerner, thus very personal. The differences do not make any of the methods better, rather, it points out the diversity of possibilities by which God wishes to manifest his will and desires.

Keywords: Lasallian discernment, Lasallian spirituality, French School of spirituality

1. INTRODUCTION

Lasallian spirituality, methods of prayer and discernment did not become as popular as that of Ignatian spirituality. The understanding and appreciation of the spirituality of the De La Salle began to unfold only in the 1960s with various scientific studies being conducted by the Christian Brothers themselves. This paper wishes to expand the reflections on Lasallian discernment as articulated by Br Miguel Campos FSC in 2006. Through a critical analysis and reflection, this paper would like to present Lasallian discernment as a distinct method in discerning God's will.

I will be looking at the French school of spirituality as well as two important writings of the Founder: Meditation at the Time of Retreat and The Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer.

2. THE FRENCH SCHOOL OF SPIRITUALITY

An important religious influence during the formative years of De La Salle was the French School of Spirituality which explains much of the spirituality of the Founder. Cardinal Berulle, a theologian and mystic, is considered the initiator of this movement. Bérulle was born in Yonne, located in the northwest of France, in 1575, but grew up in Paris. He was an exceptionally gifted child. He received an excellent education from the Jesuits and then enrolled at the Sorbonne. Berulle's important contribution to the French School of Spirituality is the total focus on Jesus, the Word incarnate, noting his sublime divinity and his willingness to become man. The challenge to the followers was a total surrender of all their desires and interest so that Christ may be incarnated in them. This detachment was sustained by the reading of the Scriptures,



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and interior prayer. Ignatian elements are already quite noticeable here.

It is important to note that Berulle's movement started as a reaction to the degrading quality of religious and priestly life in France. It seems France was already beginning the cultural and religious revolution that modernity would soon bring to this country. Amidst this internal religious turmoil, any devout Catholic or clergy would have access to a good number of devotional readings available in the French language. Writings of Teresa of Jesus (+1582), John of the Cross (+1591) and many more available. But more than seeing this situation as preparation for a political revolution, the dire situation actually gave France "the golden age of spirituality" in the 17th century¹. The French School of Spirituality appeared as a religious reformation movement happening among the French clergy during this period².

Much of this French School of Spirituality is reflected in the two manuscripts of the Founder which I will explore. The Meditations in the Time of Retreat was composed by the Founder himself. It was only through the dissertation of Br Michelle Sauvage³ that its importance in articulating the spirituality of the Founder has been appreciated. The Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer was also composed by the Founder towards the end of his life which revealed not only the methods of prayer that the Founder wishes that all the Brothers would follow, but also the deep and personal relationship of the Founder with Jesus, the Lord. His desire was that everyone encounter God in the depths of their hearts.

3. MEDITATIONS IN THE TIME OF RETREAT

¹ Raymond Deville, *The French School Of Spirituality* repr., Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1994.

² Deville, 1994.

In the Meditations, Arnandez FSC identifies four prominent themes repeating within his writings: "theocentric, Christocentric, the action of the Holy Spirit, and the human person before God".⁴ Theocentrism refers to God's grandeur. This is in fact a recurring theme in the Psalms. In 90.2 of the Meditations, De La Salle invites the readers to look at God as supreme above all things. Christocentric refers to the centrality of Christ and the incarnation event. A Brother is invited to an intimate union with Christ. De La Salle would write in 167.2 of the Meditations, "Attach yourselves only to Christ". This is the basis of the Lasallian prayer: Live Jesus in our hearts, forever! The Action of the Holy Spirit refers to the role of the Spirit in the lives of the Brothers whom he considers as having the capacity to touch hearts if the Spirit is within them. (MTR 43.2-3). And lastly, the human person before God refers to a person's nothingness before God's majesty and power (MTR 169.1) to bring a person to worship and love God even more (MTR 90.1).

4. THE METHOD OF INTERIOR PRAYER

In the Explication of the Method of Interior Prayer, for 21st century readers, De La Salle seemed to have taken great pains to write a very detailed, and step-by-step method of praying. Readers in his time will not find this unusual because of the strong stylistic influence of Rene Descartes among many contemporary writers. The Founder wrote a lot of helpful materials for prayer for the public, but he wrote the Explication specifically for the novices who were beginners in prayer. He

³ The author is still contacting the Brothers' General House regarding this dissertation.

⁴ Jean Baptiste de La Salle et al., *Meditations By John Baptist De La Salle* repr., Landover, Md.: Lasallian Publications, 1994.



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wrote this towards the end of his life which may seem to reflect his deep desire to ensure the spiritual formation of the future Brothers. In the Explication, one would find twenty-one different stages or acts with detailed instructions⁵. De la Salle did not intend his novices to follow each of the acts, rather, his intent was that they be imbued with God's presence. This means that, at any point, they may disengage from the stages or acts and follow the leading of the Spirit.

Arnandez FSC admits the "outmoded" language use but one must look at its "inner dynamism".⁶ What the Founder refers to as "prayer of simple attention" means (1) being before God's presence with faith and (2) be "in a disposition of interior silence and affectionate attention". For beginners, he gives them many exercises as a way of reaching proficiency; while for the proficient, he gives them "prolonged reflections" to enter gradually into God's embrace; and lastly, for the advanced, the prayer of simple attention or being just in the presence of God without any further instruction.

5. LASALLIAN INTERIOR LIFE

De La Salle's spirituality and prayer methods can thus be described through these five components. First, God is within reach and truly present to those who truly desire to encounter him. Jesus connected with tax collectors, prostitutes, soldiers, priests, Pharisees, and, yes, including children. De La Salle accepted students and aspiring Brothers from all walks of life recognizing God's presence in each of them. Second, it does not

matter if you are a beginner or an expert in prayer, one can encounter God within one's own human limitations. The woman with hemorrhage touched the tassel, the blind man shouted until he was heard, while many of the apostles met Jesus in their fishing boats or in their places of work. Br Irene⁷ met De La Salle as a soldier that deserted his battalion. He was searching for himself and found himself through the Founder. He would later become one of the most remembered novice master of the institute. Third, just keep on praying even if you don't want to for practice makes perfect. Frequent encounter with God or frequent moments of prayer prepares the soul for an intimate encounter with God. Sixth, read the scriptures and be enveloped in the power of the living Word of God. Fifth, drop all instructions once you find yourself in God's presence. Basked in his presence and in his love. The end goal is not the following of the methods but that one be imbued with God's presence.

6. NARRATIVES OF DISCERNMENT

Br Campos argues that Lasallian discernment cannot be described by examining how the Founder use the word discernment in his writings. The words discernment and discern were indeed use but not in the manner as to explain their usage. Rather, he proposes looking at narratives of discernment⁸ through key events in the life of the Founder and the Institute to describe Lasallian discernment. Campos looks at four crossroads:

1. The initial crossroad experience: the individual discernment of a personal calling (in De La Salle's thirties)

⁵ Jean Baptiste de La Salle, *Explanation Of The Method Of Interior Prayer* repr., Landover, Md.: Lasallian Publications, 1995.

⁶ Jean Baptiste de La Salle, *Explanation Of The Method Of Interior Prayer* repr., Landover, Md.: Lasallian Publications, 1995.

⁷ Leo Burkhard and Luke Salm, *Encounters De La Salle At Parmenie* repr., Illinois: Christian Brothers National Office, 1983.

⁸ Campos Miguel, "Vol 3, No 2 (2012) | AXIS: Journal Of Lasallian Higher Education", Axis.Smumn.Edu, Last modified 2018, <http://axis.smumn.edu/archive/vol-3-no-2-2012/>.



2. The second crossroad experience: the community discernment of a group associated and united for the mission (during De La Salle's forties)
3. Daily crossroad experiences over the course of his life, the tension between personal and community discernment (during De La Salle's fifties and sixties)
4. The final crossroad experience: a collective discernment of the Society of the Brothers of the Christian Schools in the absence of their Founder (towards the end of De La Salle's sixties)

These crossroads reflect an itinerary that desires to put together seamlessly the deep desire of the Founder to serve God and the poor. Campos points to "a before and an after", revealing a developing and daily renewal of commitment to God's stirrings.

Campos notes also the Exodus nature of the different crossroads. There was a constant invitation to abandon a familiar place in order face the unknown. De La Salle progressed gradually to this experience of self-emptying that is oftentimes painful. The Founder desired to be faithful to the stirrings of the Spirit.

7. SIX CRITERIA FOR SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT

Campos' explanation of these criteria begins with a critique of Ignatian discernment by stating that discernment has excessively focused on the spiritual life and virtues⁹. Other areas in the life of the Church did not receive the same intensity such as signs of the times and social realities, Christology, doctrines and

scripture, and ecclesial movements among others. Discernment of the spirits has often been limited within the encounter of the individual with God. The search is zeroed in on the private movements of the Spirit.¹⁰

In contrast, De La Salle invited the Brothers to move beyond the initial interior movements of the spirit. He reminded them to pay attention to the needs of the students, the teachers, the school and the community where they were.

These criteria articulated by Campos characterized the way of discernment of the community of Brothers. These were expressed in the significant crossroads and the writings of the Founder. Similar to the Ignatian Rules of Discernment, the six criteria act as guidelines for the individual and the community in reflecting and making decisions.

First criterion: historic and theocentric.

A way of regarding in faith the reality of the poor and the marginalized from the viewpoint of God's plan.

Second criterion: seriousness in the professional and missionary commitment and the respect for the "earthly realities".

Third criterion: interiority and the centrality of the person of Christ, a Christocentric spirituality. The evangelical instinct.

Fourth criterion: the demands of an association for the mission. The development of a Community – relationships of solidarity with one's colleagues and one's students – implies the commitment to respect certain exigencies.

Fifth criterion: Unconditional love for, and the proclamation of, the Kingdom, building up the body of Christ in a Church-communion.

⁹ Manuel Ruiz Jurado, *El Discernimiento Espiritual* repr., Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 2005.

¹⁰ Jurado, 2005.



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Sixth criterion: A hope against all hope, revealing how the Kingdom is growing here and now and awaiting the revelation of the new heaven and the new earth.

8. DISCUSSION

Initially, Lasallian discernment appears as an alternative to Ignatian discernment. Reflecting on the treatises of the Founder, the reflection of Br Campos, it appears that we are seeing a very different discernment process. Lasallian discernment brings a distinct method of discerning as a community. It presupposes, in fact, an Ignatian discernment process being undergone prior to the community discernment. It assumes that those gathered in community discernment are responding in joy and faithfulness to the stirrings of the spirit.

Br Campos is right in asserting that the Founder would not simply ask the Brothers to consider only the personal movements of the spirit towards personal growth, rather the Founder desires that the Brothers recognized the interior movements towards the benefit of the mission. This seems to be difficult, but I think this is what differentiates the Ignatian discernment from the rest.

The criterion proposed by Br Campos reflect already what is being practiced in the Institute. In a personal interview with Br Michael Broughton, all periods of retreat have moments of community discernment regarding the life of the Brothers and the educational mission. In the Philippines, several community discernments have been undergone in the last 20 years that have resulted in the publication of important guidelines. Of import is the Lasallian Guiding Principles that articulated the core values, and the Lasallian way of formation, education, association, and social development.

Is the Lasallian discernment process applicable to non-Lasallians? Yes, of course. The criteria set by Campos could be adjusted accordingly based on the charism and mission of the community that is discerning. The process allows the community to be faithful to their charism, be challenged to be better, renew bond with Christ, and respond appropriately to the signs of the times.

9. CONCLUSION

In this brief research, one thing noticeable is the use of the key events the Founder's life: *vocation, commitment, growth, and conflict*. Undoubtedly, these events are at the center of important decisions that De La Salle made for the teachers and the Christian Schools. The events allow us to discover the connection of other events: his uncertainties, decisions during conflicting issues, and the relationship of the De la Salle with the Brothers. We must not forget also the conflicts he had to resolve with the civil and Church authorities. In each situation we see a decision taking shape, being affirmed, and eventually acted upon. These events are not isolated and insignificant moments, rather these reveal that God is the God of history present every personal event but always in parallel with the Pascal mystery, the Resurrection of Jesus¹¹.

The Lasallian discernment process is an invitation to continue responding with love to the invitation of God to serve. Probably, it might even be a call to serve beyond our comfort zones. In this era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, Lasallians worldwide are now being challenged to go beyond their personal boundaries of security and ease.

¹¹ Med. p. 417



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