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Week Three: You Have the Texts

Greetings once again from Rome and SIEL, where time is flying! Three weeks have been completed and only one week remains in the residency portion of our program. It was a busy and challenging week three, one that provided an important preview of the work and the historical journeys that await all of us participants.

We spent the week with historian and Lasallian studies expert Brother Alain Houry, whose subject was “A Critical Study of De La Salle.” At the heart of Brother Alain’s conferences was one question: Why and through what should we study the biographers of De La Salle? Mornings of notes and discussions on “the first three” (Brother Bernard, Dom François-Elie Maieffer, and Canon Jean-Baptiste Blain) gave way to afternoons examining turning-point episodes in the life of the Founder. In each of these we were asked to find the subtle significances of Lasallian stories and images that we thought were familiar but suddenly looked as strange and intimidating as the reaches of deep space. At this point, Brother Alain would gently but matter-of-factly say, “Vous avez les textes.” — “You have the texts.” It did not take us long to realize both the challenge and the insight in those words.

The challenge lies in the fact that as much as the biographies tell us about De La Salle, there also is much that they do not and cannot tell us. There are holes. There are dead ends. Each source of information can raise as many uncertainties as it resolves, so simply having a text rarely satisfies the need for either historical or phenomenological certainty. There is no “Rosetta Stone” to unlock the life and the mind of the Founder. Further, the lenses through which we study history are invariably someone else’s eyes. In terms of achieving absolute objectivity, this is an inherent difficulty. Historical knowledge often carries with it the mind of the knower, so to find the true subject one must be part scholar, part psychologist, and part detective. Again, even as the path leads forward, it seldom goes straight.

However, these issues do not mean that it is not possible to gather enough information and glean enough knowledge to move forward with a rich grasp of our Lasallian foundations. Therein lies the insight. It is a matter of realizing the non-linear and holistic nature of human experience. The Institute’s collection of biographies of De La Salle can and should be taken together, where it offers a bountiful combination of reporting, conjecture, mythmaking, and

commentary. While some works better serve our need to know the data and others our need to know its impact, they all contain vital pieces of a multi-dimensional perspective on De La Salle, his life, his work, and the early days of what would become the Institute. While the perspective many not be absolutely complete, its depth enables us nonetheless to encounter the heart of De La Salle while we continue to plumb the depths of the story and advance our historical memory.

The goal in all of this is, of course, to use what we know in order to gain crucial understandings of what it means to be Lasallian. The story comes to us through words. It is from the words that we learn the story and upon which we build our own telling of it, a telling which not only repeats the words but, hopefully, goes beyond mere retelling and into the art of living their meaning and their challenge. The better we understand the words, the better we will be able to draw from them to animate the activity that we call the Lasallian mission.

And so, it is the task of each generation of Lasallian researchers to explore the words, to know where they came from and for what reason, to listen for what they say and for what do not and, most importantly, to give true voice to the lessons that they give and the questions that they ask. It is a service to be rendered in the name of fidelity and for the sake of life. The fidelity is to the fullness of fact and meaning of what has taken place before now. The life is that of today’s Lasallian family as it relies on, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, “the mystic chords of memory” that link our hearts to the foundations of the Lasallian spirit.

At SIEL, both our studies and our experiences of one another have taught us that the Lasallian heritage is nothing if not a journal of companions, each entry written with a deep sense of respect and stewardship for all of the other entries and in view of a horizon seen through the eyes of faith. To do this, there must be a consciousness of Lasallian history that moves us to want to hear and know the entries in all of their times and modes of telling. This is our best chance to ensure the Lasallian story’s continued presence and relevance in the world. It is no small order. Fortunately, it is within reach. You have the texts. See you next week.

Live Jesus in our hearts forever!
Bob Carrejo