

Article

Renewing a Prophetic Mysticism for Teaching Children Justly: A Lasallian Provocation

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Abstract: There is an urgent need to renew religious charisms historically founded by teaching Religious Orders to invigorate and sustain God’s mission through Catholic education. It is within this need that I consider how the Lasallian tradition may be critically mined to develop a prophetic mysticism that integrates contemplation with the public activity of teaching children justly as prophetic witness in contemporary Catholic education. This article makes two contributions. First, it methodologically brings the Lasallian tradition into dialogue with the contemporary turn to children and childhood in theological research. I suggest that this turn presses us to re-commit to a preferential option for children in Christian mission, which serves as an interpretive lens to retrieve and develop a Lasallian prophetic mysticism. This lens allows us to see more clearly how God calls forth the Christian vocation of teaching through children as vulnerable agents who share and participate in life with us. Second, building on this prophetic mysticism, I propose a praxis of socially engaged contemplation that attunes Catholic educators to become ethically present to the social marginalization of children. Cultivating this ethical presence is necessary for teaching children justly—a moral imperative that has become all the more crucial today in light of reports on the sexual abuse of children in the Catholic church.

Keywords: charisma; vocation; prophetic mysticism; preferential option for children; discernment; Lasallian



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1. Introduction

The renewal of charisms historically founded by teaching Religious Orders remains an urgent task in Catholic education, in light of the declining number of religious sisters, brothers and priests in schools (Grace and O’Keefe 2007; Earl 2007; Lydon 2009). This demographic change presents a key challenge worldwide as to whether and how religious charisms could be transmitted to and maintained by lay school leaders and teachers who are now the majority in Catholic educational institutions (Lydon 2009). As pointed out in the CCE’s 1982 document *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith*, “it is the lay teachers, and indeed all persons, believers or not, who will substantially determine whether or not a [Catholic] school realizes its aims and accomplishes its objectives” (Congregation for Catholic Education 1982, para. 1). A major task here is the extent to which lay educators—some of whom may not be Catholic or have a religious affiliation—could be formed to embody the charisms. What is at stake is the distinctive influence these charisms have on the Catholic identity and mission of religious sponsored schools. Religious educator Thomas Groome goes as far to say that “if the foundation charisms [of religious institutions] cannot be broken open among teaching colleagues, there will be no alternative but to call it [the Catholic educational project] off” (cited in Lydon 2009, p. 51).

In this article, I prefer to use the term ‘renewal’ to ‘transmission’ or ‘maintenance’ (cf. Lydon 2009) because it captures more closely the living dynamism of charisma as the creative gift of God’s Spirit in life. As theologian Bernard Lee (2004) argues, “Charisma is not property. It is not transferrable. It is not transmittable. And it is not controllable”. Instead, it is “reinvented, posited, in a new socio-historical setting, but never simply reenacted” (p. 16).

Charism is “reinvented . . . when a community’s deep story speaks effective, felt words to the transformation of some of the world’s most pressing needs and aspirations” (ibid., p. 5). The content of charism is relationality, impelled by God’s Spirit as transformative grace that calls us to lived discipleship, responsive to mission in this world “where God’s intentions for history are to be lived” (ibid., p. 4). Thus, charism cannot simply be recovered as some pre-packaged good handed on unilaterally by members of religious congregation to the laity. Its renewal is an interpretive task that engages in a “process of retrieval, critique, and reconstruction” (McCarthy 2000, p. 202). It involves “an imaginative use of tradition” (Sheldrake 1991, p. 168). That is, how might the wisdom found in religious charisms be broken open, re-imagined, and embodied in fresh ways that invigorate God’s mission in today’s world through Catholic education?

I address this question with a focus on the Lasallian charism, bringing it into dialogue with the current theological interest in children and childhood (for example Berryman 2009, 2017; Bunge 2001, 2006a; Dillen and Pollefeyt 2010; Jensen 2005; Miller-McLemore 2003, 2017; Prevette et al. 2014; Strhan et al. 2017; Wall 2010a, 2010b, 2017). This set of literature presses us to commit in Christian mission to a *preferential option for children*, which serves as an interpretive lens to retrieve and develop a *Lasallian prophetic mysticism* that discerns God calling forth the Christian vocation of teaching through children as vulnerable agents who share and participate in life with us. To be clear, my analysis attends more to the ‘what’ of charism than the ‘how’ of its transmission, which, as Lydon (2009) points out, “the literature is replete with” (p. 51). Yet, insufficient attention has been given to distill the deeper inner dynamics of charism at work, beyond the typical articulation of it as a seemingly static set of characteristics, precepts or even values that define a religious congregation’s and/or school’s identity.

In this regard, a prophetic mysticism for teaching children justly is drawn out and developed as that deeper dynamic operative in the Lasallian charism. Such is a mysticism that awakens teachers to the abiding presence of God’s Spirit who is ever enlivening and energising the everyday act of educating as “touch[ing] the hearts” of students (*Meditations* 139.3).¹ The mystical is also dialectically related to the prophetic; both mutually constitute each other to shape Christian public witness that enflashes the passion and compassion of God’s loving solidarity with the poor and marginalised (Bingemer 2020; Egan 2001; Sheldrake 2005). Lasallian mysticism of faith is thus constitutive of the call to teach children justly as an act of prophetic witness with zeal. Lasallian prophetic mysticism integrates contemplation with the public activity of educating children justly. In doing so, it cultivates a praxis of socially engaged contemplation that attunes Catholic educators to become ethically present to the social marginalization of children.

2. Why a Prophetic Mysticism to Teach Children Justly?

This renewal of a Lasallian prophetic mysticism is significant in light of the turn to children and childhood in contemporary Catholic and Protestant theology. This turn is a response to how “issues related to children have tended to be marginal in almost every area of contemporary theology” (Bunge 2001, p. 3). While the care for children and their instruction in faith are enduring themes in the Christian tradition, there is a lack of systematic and critical attention given to how understandings of children and childhood are theologically constructed. Sustaining this theological turn is a continued concern for our ethical obligations to children not only in families but also at the levels of the church and the state (Bunge 2001). This concern is critical in light of the sexual abuse of children by religious authorities. It is also fueled by the promulgation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which pushes churches to critically reflect on their theological foundations so as to better serve child advocacy while attending to the moral and spiritual formation of children (for example McAleese 2019; Wall 2010b, 2017; Werpehowski 2012). This theological turn to children and childhood, I argue, presses us to commit to a preferential option for children in Christian mission. It is

within this option for children that I anchor the renewal of a Lasallian prophetic mysticism for Catholic education.

2.1. Preferential Option for Children in Christian Mission

To be clear, an option for children does not replace a preferential option for the poor, but builds on it by recognising the systemic marginalisation of children as a socially diverse group. Children as defined by the United Nations refer to persons under the age of eighteen. This article uses this broad definition but acknowledges that more than just age, ‘child’ and ‘children’ carry “different meanings across diverse cultures and societies” (Wall 2017, p. 5). ‘Childhood’ is relationally shaped and experienced contextually by children with others in society, at the complex intersection of biological, developmental, socio-economic and political factors (Pang 2021). Yet, children globally are still the least among the socially vulnerable in their situated relationships of dependence on *and* interdependency with adults in society. Some children also find themselves already discriminated and marginalized at the complex intersection of multiple identity markers such as class, race, nationality, able-ness, religion, gender and sexuality. A preferential option for children calls us to confront how it is that some children do not survive well into adulthood. Whose children are these? What is going on, and what is God calling us to do?

Two themes in the theological research on children and childhood call us to reclaim a preferential option for children in Christian mission: (i) an ethic of justice for children; and (ii) the relational agency of children as integral to their dignity as human persons.

(i) Ethic of Justice for Children

An ethic of justice for children is called for in view of how their human flourishing continues to be threatened by structural conditions of violence, poverty, disease and malnutrition. Yet, as Whitmore and Winwright (1997) have pointed out, children as human subjects in their own right and who they are remain an “undeveloped theme” in Catholic teaching, which “subsumes its treatment of children under the rubric of the family” (p. 161). While Catholic teaching would uphold the intrinsic dignity of children as being made in God’s image and likeness, it also positions them as passive. “For the most part, church teaching simply admonishes the parents to educate their children in the faith and for children to obey their parents” (ibid., p. 162). It does not adequately address the social suffering of children caused by structural forms of injustice, some of which is reproduced and inflicted in family life. The global concern for the world’s children calls for more complicated responses not only from the family, but beyond it and in connection with the state and other institutions.

Similarly, Ethna Regan (2014) highlights that children are “barely visible” in Catholic social thought (p. 1021). In her analysis, she singles out *Evangelium Vitae* by John Paul II for its “most extensive discussion of the child within Catholic social teaching” (ibid., p. 1026). However, the attention is skewed toward the unborn, reflecting a “hyper-natalism” that “does not defend the lives of born—hungry, impoverished, exploited, abandoned—children with the same zeal as the defence of the unborn child” (ibid., p. 1027). Regan argues for the need to articulate a “consistent ethic” (ibid, p. 1027) that corrects this hyper-natalism, especially in light of more reports on child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church:

Children have become a new measure of justice for the church ad intra, a measure that will determine our credibility to speak on matters of justice for children, born and unborn, in a world where poor children continue to suffer from having too much to bear and from given too little to develop properly. (ibid., p. 1030)

What is at stake is the Church’s obligation and credibility as witness to God’s mission of caring justly for children as an imperative of the Gospel.

Contemporary theological work on children and childhood has lifted up and re-emphasised this biblical mandate to welcome, care and advocate for children as acts of Christian discipleship (cf. Mark 9: 33–37, 10: 14–16; Matthew 18: 2–6; Luke 9: 48). Biblical

scholar Judith Gundry-Volf (2001), for example, reclaims the radicality of Jesus's teaching on children in the Synoptic Gospels:

Jesus did not just teach how to make an adult world kinder and more just for children; he taught the arrival of a social world in part defined by and organized around children. (p. 60)

One hears in these words the prophetic call to reclaim and re-commit to a preferential option for children in Christian mission. An ethic of justice that serves this option stems first from our recognition of children as active "representatives of Christ" (Gundry-Volf 2001, p. 60). Children reveal a glimpse of God's presence that transforms us in our common journey together in a life of faith. Beneath the social vulnerability of children is a fragile agency that an ethic of justice ought to protect and promote.

(ii) Relational agency of children

The conception of children as agents is another important theme in the anthropological focus within the theological turn to children and childhood. This interest in children's agency stems partly from a social constructivist paradigm of childhood that repositions the passivity of children to being active makers of meaning in their life worlds (Hyde et al. 2010; James and Prout 1997; Wells 2015). Children do not *have* agency only when they become adults. They are agents as relational human beings from the outset, making a difference "with and to others" by the meanings they co-construct in socially situated ways (Pang 2021, p. 93). As David Oswell (2013) points out, agency is "always relational and never a property; it is always in-between and interstitial" (p. 270). Relational agency is realised in-between "[a]dults and children [who] belong together and contribute to each other's lives" (Sturm 1992, p. 158).

This interest in children's relational agency has pushed theologians and religion scholars to critique the often oversimplified ways in which the nature of children has been articulated in our religious traditions. As ethicist John Wall (2010b) highlights, "It is remarkable that, while Christianity has consistently held up humanity's ambiguous nature as simultaneously good and sinful overall, when it comes to children it has generally swung to one extreme or the other" (p. 255). Such unidimensional views "diminish their complexity and integrity, fostering narrow understandings of adult-child relationships" (Bunge 2006b, p. 54). The task, then, is to draw out more nuanced and diverse theological interpretations that reflect the complex wholeness of children as relational human beings. For example, theologian Bunge (2006b) has argued for the need to uphold "the complexity and dignity of children" by holding in tension six "paradoxical perspectives": children as "gifts of God and sources of joy"; "sinful creatures and moral agents"; "developing beings who need instruction and guidance"; "being made in the image of God"; "models of faith and sources of revelation"; and "orphans, neighbors, and strangers in need of justice and compassion" (pp. 58–62).

These six perspectives shape what theologian D.J. Konz (2014) has conceived as "mission postures" (p. 23) of the church toward children in Christian history. Konz particularly points out the need to be critically reflexive of adult-centric assumptions that place children as passive unformed adults in Christian mission. Recognising "the *many childs* of Christian history . . . alerts us to our adult tendency . . . to 'construct' what we understand a child to be" (Konz 2014, p. 23, italics his). Underscored in Bunge (2006b) and Konz (2014) is a move to critique and reconstruct our theological anthropology by encountering real children in their lived realities, making a space for their relational agency as integral to being fully human and made in God's image and likeness.

The conception of children as agents thus broadens the anthropological foundation for a preferential option for children, which does not only commit us to struggle against structural injustices that refuse them possibilities in this present life. It also calls us to promote their sense of agency in the here and now as responsible protagonists of social change. An ethic of justice for children (as discussed earlier) that protects them in their social vulnerability should also recognise and cultivate their relational agency. To be clear,

the social vulnerability of children is not diametrically opposed to their relational agency. In fact, children's social vulnerability also lies in how their agency can easily be obscured, stifled, manipulated and/or exploited within structural relations of adult-centric power.

2.2. Implications for Catholic Education

This preferential option for children in mission must also push us to reflect on whether and how Catholic schools are prophetic spaces that educate children justly. To this end, Mary Doyle Roche (2009) draws on the common good to structure a vision of educating justly in Catholic schools. More crucially, she argues that the common good must necessarily include children's participation as vulnerable agents in their own right. This participation realises the intrinsic dignity of who they already are as God's children. Thus:

An adequate vision of the common good must account for the vulnerabilities and the possibilities of children and childhood, and bring children in from the margins to the center to insure that our assumptions about the "common" good are not distorted by the perspective of those in positions of power and privilege. With children's experiences at the center, the common good of society allows for children as individuals, as members of families and other communities to flourish. (Roche 2009, p. 91)

Children do not contribute to the common good only when they become adults. They do so *as they are* while growing to learn and live responsibly with others different from them. For Roche, the common good serves as a relational ethic that counters the transactional, performance-driven and competitive culture engendered by the commodification of education. It reclaims the importance of a communal anthropology in Catholic schooling that resists the more limited vision of child as burden, client, and future worker in market-based educational reforms (Roche 2009; Whitmore and Winwright 1997). This is a communal anthropology that encourages the agentic participation of children as social protagonists of justice in the schools themselves. Roche's proposal thus echoes a preferential option for children, which makes a claim on Catholic schools to create the conditions for the flourishing of children's lives as prophetic work.

Roche's vision of educating toward social justice *for* and *with* children calls for a prophetic mysticism of teaching that serves the liberation of children from conditions that trivialise, violate and/or deny their intrinsic human dignity as God's children. This is a prophetic mysticism that cultivates a contemplative way of being with children that is socially engaged. It awakens educators to the sense of being called to teach justly by "God's disturbing presence" (Gittins 2002, p. 43) through children, especially in situations of impoverishment suffered by them. In this regard, I turn to the Lasallian charism as one of many Christian sources of spirituality for inspiration, retrieving a prophetic mysticism of faith for teaching children justly. Not only is this retrieval significant in light of a re-commitment to a preferential option for children within the contemporary theological turn to children and childhood. As I will argue, the focus on children as relational agents also allow us to re-read and deepen the dynamic of call in Lasallian mysticism: the sense that children are as much bearers of God's presence who call forth the prophetic witness of the Christian educator to teach justly.

3. The Lasallian Charism

The Lasallian tradition originates from John Baptist de La Salle (1651–1719), patron saint for Christian educators of the young and founder of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools in seventeenth century France. From its inception of Christian schools for poor boys in Rheims, the Institute has today a worldwide educational mission shared by the De La Salle Brothers and lay partners from across different faiths and cultures, and in an international network of Lasallian schools and organizations focused on the human and Christian education of the young. In this section, I draw on De La Salle's writings, the Institute's documents, and contemporary Lasallian scholarship to distill and articulate a prophetic mysticism of faith. Some may question if it is critically limiting to

draw on Lasallian scholarship produced internally by the Brothers for the Institute. Yet, this is not necessarily so as these internal sources shed light on how the Lasallian charism is understood and articulated from within the Institute through time. To the best of my knowledge, these sources have also not been widely made known outside the Institute to a larger academic community, and they should.

The Lasallian charism, as understood by the Institute, is connected to, but not synonymous with the charism of De La Salle (Schneider 2006.² Following Lee (2004), the Lasallian charism is dynamically renewed in response to mission discerned in this moment of the world's history. Yet, the manner of its renewal returns to the "deep story" (Lee 2004, p. 24) of De La Salle's founding vision that inspires the present with its living wisdom. This wisdom is found in a spirituality that grounds the call to teach children justly in an incarnational vision of education.

3.1. *Teaching Children Justly: A Commitment to a Preferential Option for Children*

Typically, the Institute speaks of its commitment to social justice as integral to its educational service to the poor. As noted in the recently published *Declaration on the Lasallian Education*: "The educational service of the poor is, *in essence*, a service to the cause of justice that, in turn, promotes equitable, inclusive societies respectful of the dignity of people and attentive to the full satisfaction of their needs" (Brothers of the Christian Schools 2020, p. 89, emphasis mine).

This conviction goes back to the founding of the Christian Schools established gratuitously for teaching poor boys how to read and write. Their origin was counter-cultural in light of the dominant belief in 17th century France that one was born into a particular stratum of society, and that the socio-economic hierarchy was inevitable. On the one hand, there were proponents such as Charles Démiat of Lyon who pleaded urgently for schools to educate the city's poor children as a matter of enabling upward social mobility. On the other hand, opponents such as La Chalotais argued against any generalized instruction of the poor: "The good of society demands that knowledge of the people not surpass that which is necessary for their work. Each man who looks beyond his sad trade will not dedicate himself to it with diligence and patience" (cited in Hengemüle 2016, p. 16). Opposition also came from poor parents, who did not view education as necessary for their children.

De La Salle, however, went against the status quo, not as an educational reformer but as a priest and canon from the perspective of Christian faith. For him, education was necessary for all persons—including the poor—to know God's goodness and to realize their God-given potential in this life:

God is so good that, having created us, he wills that all of us come to the knowledge of the truth. This truth is God himself and what he has desired to reveal to us through Jesus Christ, through the holy apostles, and through his Church. This is why God wills all people to be instructed, so that their minds may be enlightened by the light of faith. (M. 193.1)

Priority was given to the poor because Jesus came to be *with* the poor, and *as* the poor. The poor, he writes, are "images of Jesus Christ . . . who are best disposed to receive his Spirit in abundance" (M. 173.1). They share an equal and noble dignity before God as God's children.

The early Christian Schools posed a prophetic challenge to the social order in promoting universal access to quality education. Looking back, the *Declaration* interprets their founding as being a "Lasallian enterprise . . . born on the borders of dehumanization" (Brothers of the Christian Schools 2020, p. 92). From the standpoint of contemporary theological research on children and childhood, however, I would like to draw out more explicitly a particular option for children present in its tradition of service to the poor. An option for children does not replace a missional priority on the poor, but deepens it by calling attention to how they are affected the most by social, economic and political conditions that impoverish human life. Lasallian scholar Jean-Louis Schneider (2006) notes, "Lasallian charism was born in a certain environment: that of the educational movement

for the children of the poor (or of the working classes) of the Church of the Council of Trent, in France" (p. 54). As stated in the *Rule* for the Institute of the Brothers in 1718:

The necessity of this Institute is very great, because the working class and the poor, being usually little instructed and occupied all day in gaining a livelihood for themselves and their children, cannot give them the instruction they need and a respectable Christian education. nor a suitable education. It was to procure this advantage for the children of the working class and of the poor that the Christian Schools were established. (para. 4–5, cited in [De La Salle 2002](#))

De La Salle was stirred not only by the needs of artisans and the poor, but also by how their conditions had given rise to the neglect and abandonment of children. His educational vision was a response in faith to the social suffering of children. The Brothers were to "look upon the children whom [they] are charged to teach as poor, abandoned orphans" in the same way as God "looks on them with compassion and takes care of them as being their protector" (M. 37.3).

This preferential option for children is most notably reflected in the Institute's decision to incorporate the defence and promotion of children's rights as integral to the Lasallian educational mission since 2000. This move was catalyzed in part by Brother John Johnston, FSC, who as Brother Superior General in 1999, issued a groundbreaking pastoral letter—*On the Defense of Children, the Reign of God, and the Lasallian Mission*.³ Urging the Brothers and the wider Lasallian community to re-imagine its educational service to the poor through the lens of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), he writes:

The thesis of this pastoral letter is that the situation of poor children in today's world is an unspeakable scandal that our Lasallian charism invites us to make solidarity with neglected, abandoned, marginalized, and exploited children a particular focus for our mission. ([Johnston 2016](#), p. 466)

Significantly, he recalls the Institute's *Rule* to frame the preferential option for children as a Lasallian imperative:

Our *Rule* concisely and poignantly links De La Salle's progressive awareness of the situation of poor children with the *origin and development* of the Institute. As he became aware, by God's grace, of the human and spiritual distress of 'the children of artisans and of the poor,' their neglect and abandonment moved him profoundly. ([Johnston 2016](#), p. 457, emphasis his)

Johnston re-interprets this founding insight to include the violation of children's rights in situations of economic exploitation, discrimination, sexual abuse, illiteracy, violence and armed conflict. The Christian mandate to educate the poor must also now engage in the struggle for the human rights of children as a matter of justice, "in accord with what the Reign of God requires" ([Johnston 2016](#), p. 459).

What I wish to highlight is how a preferential option for children serves as a hermeneutic that reads forward the mission of Lasallian education to the poor. Who the poor are in Lasallian mission has also shifted. From the lens of children's rights, the focus is not simply on materially poor children or even the structural conditions that impoverish their lives. It also points to the social marginalization of children as the poor, in not having their concerns heard and a voice to speak. The impetus for the renewal of the Lasallian charism, I suggest, lies in the Institute's preferential option for children prophetically committed to their liberation through education in two senses: first, freedom from dehumanizing conditions that threaten the survival of children and violate their human dignity; second, freedom for their participation in the social fabric of life through a sense of belonging in the world as responsible agents and protagonists of social change. Yet, this liberatory impulse to educate children justly is discerned and renewed by a prophetic mysticism that grounds teaching as a call and practice of incarnational presence.

3.2. Prophetic Mysticism That Grounds Teaching as Incarnational Presence

For De La Salle, effective Christian education of the young depends on quality teachers who must not only be pedagogically skilled. They must also be persons of faith and moral integrity. Yet, one of the challenges faced in the early founding of the Christian schools had been the difficulty of having schoolmasters of good character. As Edward Fitzpatrick (1951) points out, “the men who drifted into teaching were too often what might be called the dregs of humanity” (p. 209). There was also no privilege in teaching poor children. The spiritual formation of teachers was De La Salle’s response to this challenge, so as to stabilise a community of committed educators and sustain their sense of mission. It was essential to inspire and form these “bedraggled schoolteachers” (Salm 2017, p. 151) to see their work as a sacred calling tied to the human dignity of the poor children they served.

To inspire in them a sense of teaching as a vocation, De La Salle drew heavily on metaphors in his meditations to shape their educational imagination spiritually. These metaphors are still formative for us today. Christian educators are “ambassadors and ministers of Jesus Christ” (M. 195.2), called to “announce the Gospel of the kingdom of God” (M. 199.2) by the witness of their lives. Just as Jesus Christ “the good shepherd who has great care for the sheep,” they are obliged to know and understand each student so as “to discern the right way to guide them” (M. 33.1). As guides and companions to the young, Christian educators also serve as “Guardian Angels” (M. 198.1). Ultimately, Christian educators are called to co-operate with Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit to “touch [the] hearts” (M. 43.3) of students, drawing them to know and love God. Students are “a letter which Jesus Christ dictates to you [the educator], which you write each day in their hearts, not with ink, but by the Spirit of the living God, who acts in you and by you through the power of Jesus Christ” (M. 195.2).

Scholarship on Lasallian spirituality has well exegeted these images (for example Fitzpatrick 1951; Marquiegui 2018; Wright 2017) to underscore teaching as a relational practice of incarnational presence. However, as Lasallian scholar Miguel Campos (2012) highlights, the dominant accent in much of this scholarship has been on De La Salle’s asceticism and the practice of virtues, driven in part by a theology of religious life that stresses on Christian perfection. The result is a prominence placed on an imitative model of discipleship, where the Christian educator follows the example of Jesus Christ in the practice of virtues that inspires students to do the same. S/he “must act as representing Jesus Christ himself” (M. 195.2). What often becomes obscured is the contemplative depth of the “mystical and ministerial thrust” (Campos 2012, p. 1) in De La Salle’s spirituality. Yet, a key strand that renders depth to his spiritual writings is this: teaching as incarnational presence begins with a contemplative attentiveness and receptivity to Jesus Christ present in each child as God’s own.

As reflected in De La Salle’s meditation on the Feast of the Epiphany, educators are to be like the Magi, seeing God’s solidarity with children in their poverty and marginalisation while adoring the Infant Child:

Recognize Jesus beneath the poor rags of the child whom you have to instruct.
Adore him in them . . . May faith lead you to [instruct] with affection and zeal,
because these children are the members of Jesus Christ. (M. 96.3)

Retrievable from this meditation is a dynamic of call. God calls us to the vocation of teaching through children, by becoming one *of* them and *with* them in Jesus Christ. The Christian vocation of teaching is thus rooted in a mysticism that sees God’s presence *in* and *through* children as gift, which simultaneously calls forth the task of nurture so as to build the Reign of God with them in the present. “It is God himself who has led them to you; it is God who makes you responsible for their salvation”, (M. 37.1) writes De La Salle. In Bunge’s (2006b) terms, De La Salle’s writings place an accent on children as “developing beings who need instruction and guidance” (p. 60), as well as their marginal status as “orphans, neighbors, and strangers who need to be treated with justice and compassion” (p. 62; M. 37.3). Yet, children are also “sources or vehicles of revelation” (p. 61). They are vulnerable agents who mediate God’s call to teach justly.

Inextricably bound up with this mysticism is the call of the Christian educator as prophetic witness. For De La Salle, the Magi are also an image of prophetic resistance in unsettling Herod's kingship by their search for the Infant Child:

What holy audacity in our Magi, to enter the capital and make their way even to Herod's throne! They feared nothing because the faith inspired them and the grandeur of [Christ] whom they were seeking caused them to forget and even to scorn all human considerations, considering the king to whom they were speaking to be infinitely beneath the one announced to them by the star. (M. 96.2)

Upon encountering the Infant Child, the Magi "left without concerning themselves any further about King Herod" (M. 96.2). De La Salle connects their refusal to cooperate with Herod to the prophetic stance of the Christian educator: "So, too, should faith make you despise all that the world esteems" (M. 96.2). To qualify, De La Salle is not rejecting the world. Rather, in the words of biblical scholar Warren Carter (2002), De La Salle is challenging the Christian educator to "resist the empire's unjust commitments to power, wealth, and status" (p. 40). The prophetic witness of the Christian educator is mystically rooted in an interior conversion of the heart to the poor Christ in children.

Stemming from Lasallian mysticism, then, is a mode of discerning the prophetic contours of teaching as a Christian vocation from the standpoint of God's solidarity with children as the least amongst the poor in Christ. Lasallian scholar Luke Salm (2017) describes this mode as a movement of "double contemplation" that discerns on the one hand God's saving will for all, but from the concrete social realities of children on the other hand (p. 150). In the Lasallian tradition, the prophetic call to educate the poor is inseparable from the struggle for social justice that particularly lifts up the humanity of children who continue to be socially marginalized. A commitment to a preferential option for children calls for the renewal and development of such a prophetic mysticism that is socially responsive and praxis-oriented toward the liberation of children as *Missio Dei* in education.

3.3. Faith and Zeal as a Dynamic of Lasallian Prophetic Mysticism

Animating Lasallian prophetic mysticism is the twinned dynamic of Faith and Zeal as the Spirit of the Institute. According to Jacques Goussin (2003), the Spirit of Faith is "a Christian viewpoint, a way of seeing and judging that is in harmony with the Gospel" (p. 91). It confronts educators to "learn to see in every happening and in each person, especially in the poor, a sign and call of the Spirit" (Goussin 2003, p. 93). The Spirit of Faith is as such a principle in Lasallian discernment rooted in a conviction that sees no reality outside of God. This is a God who remains faithfully present *to* and *in* the world, dynamically involved in its transformation through education.

Thus, the Spirit of Faith transposes the witness of teachers into a contemplative key, to expect the more of God as living Mystery active in providing, sustaining, and drawing educational relationships into the fullness of divine life. It paradoxically demands that the teacher freely give of her/himself to participate in God's educational mission, to trust radically in the Providence of God with the conviction that "the One-Who-Calls creates us *for* vocation, a capacity for responding to relationship" (Cahalan 2017, p. 17). It is this faith that underpins De La Salle's invocation of prophet Habakkuk's words: "Lord, the work is yours" (Koch et al. 2004, p. 225). What one hears in these words is a hope-filled abandonment to an open future in God, whose Spirit calls teachers toward an ardent zeal to incarnate God's presence in the everyday educational activity with children.

Lasallian zeal, which flows from the Spirit of Faith, propels the prophetic witness of teachers patterned after Christ's kenotic love to be *with*, and *of service* to children. Zeal is incarnational faith in action:

Let it be clear, then, in all your conduct towards the children who are entrusted to you that you look upon yourselves as ministers of God, carrying out your ministry with love and a sincere and true zeal, accepting with much patience the

difficulties you have to suffer, willing to be despised by men to be persecuted, even to give your life for Jesus in the fulfillment of your ministry. (M. 201.1)

This zeal to educate children for God's mission is thus impelled by God's saving love through Jesus Christ (M. 201.2). It is that fire in the belly, which charges teachers to announce the Gospel in the context of the school as Christ's body, whose members include children as fellow disciples and as "heirs of the kingdom of God" (M. 96.3; M. 201.2). To announce the Gospel, as Campos (1994) points out, "is not reduced to practices and prescriptions" (p. 424). Rather, it obliges educators to "become incarnate, that is, take on the flesh and blood realities of the students' lives in an affective and effective manner, to walk around in their shoes, to unite [their] own history to that of [their] students, to the whole history of salvation, to the mystery of Christ" (Campos 1994, p. 424). Lasallian zeal thus drives educators to become living witnesses of the Gospel by accompanying the young, guiding them to see that their lives matter because God has created them to bear goodness in the world. Lasallian zeal draws forth passion and perseverance from teachers to desire for and work toward the human flourishing of children as their students.

4. Toward a Praxis of Socially Engaged Contemplation

What ought to be reclaimed and renewed from the Lasallian charism is a prophetic mysticism for teaching children justly. This renewal is not only for the Institute, but also in service of Catholic education to take seriously a preferential option for children. To recall Regan (2014): "Children have become a new measure of justice for the church ad intra" (p. 1030). Lasallian prophetic mysticism consists of a mode of educational discernment that imbibes an ethic of justice for children. It offers a praxis of socially engaged contemplation that cultivates in educators an ethical presence necessary for teaching children justly in Catholic education.

In this regard, I turn to the writings of theologian and Lasallian scholar, Michel Sauvage (1999), who has conceived of the mystical-prophetic stance in De La Salle's spiritual doctrine as "mystical realism" (p. 224). As he contends, Lasallian mystical realism is distinctive because of its emergence from a spirituality that De La Salle developed specifically for the Brothers as educators. Such was a spirituality that arose gradually from "the concrete existential situation" of the Brothers in their relationships with one another, as well as with the young they instruct (*ibid.*, p. 224). Sauvage further distills a four-fold "rhythm" to capture the inner dynamics of this mystical realism: (i) "to consider the concrete teaching situation"; (ii) "to contemplate the element of mystery involved with it"; (iii) "to make a renewed commitment to transform the present reality"; and (iv) "to be open to the transcendent and freely given Ultimate, that is, to the reality of God" (*ibid.*, 224). I have visually represented this four-fold "rhythm" as iterative and cyclical (rather than linear) in Figure 1 below.

This four-fold 'rhythm' captures the dialectical relationship between contemplation and social action in teaching. I suggest that it scaffolds a praxis of socially engaged contemplation which, from a Lasallian perspective, begins with the lived relationship between teacher and student. In considering the concrete teaching situation, Sauvage calls the educator to be attentive to the social realities of students and the demands they make not only on how one teaches, but also who one becomes as teacher:

Look at the life you are living; be aware of the distressing situation of the youngsters that God has placed in your path; use that as a measure of what is at stake in your teaching service. (*ibid.*, p. 225)

The connection with the prophetic is in the third movement regarding transformative praxis. By this, Sauvage urges the educator to be pedagogically creative but not simply for the sake of being technically innovative. Such creativity is rooted in a participation with the Spirit that leads the teacher to live into the "mystery of [Christ's] struggle for justice" (*ibid.*, 226).

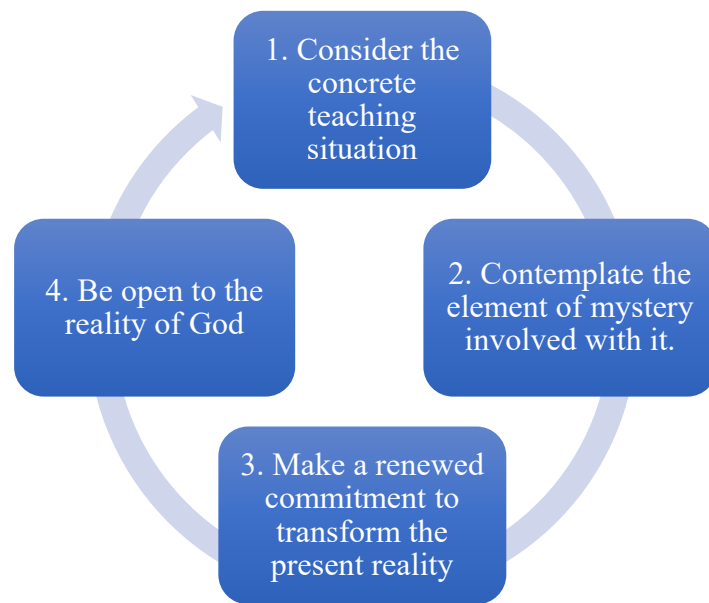


Figure 1. Four-fold ‘rhythm’ in lasallian mystical realism.

At the heart of this Lasallian mystical realism is teaching as an incarnational work of touching the hearts of children in faith and zeal. “You carry out a work that requires you to touch hearts, but this you cannot do except by the Spirit of God” (M. 43.3). Yet, we cannot touch the hearts of children as educators until we allow them to break open our own hearts. Recall that De La Salle was moved by the plight of children he encountered in their poverty. Recent theological interest in children and childhood pushes us to recognize more clearly this receptivity within Lasallian mysticism to the cry of God’s Spirit in the lives of children as vulnerable agents. It is this cry that awakens the hearts of teachers and summons them to prophetic witness.

Being attentive to this cry is foundational to cultivating an ethical presence for teaching children justly. In Table 1, I offer a set of reflection questions alongside Sauvage’s four-fold ‘rhythm’, structuring a praxis of socially engaged contemplation. These questions invite educators to remain open and critically attuned to what the presence of each child as student calls from them.

Table 1. Questions for a praxis of socially engaged contemplation in teaching.

Four-Fold Rhythm in Lasallian Mystical Realism (Sauvage 1999)		Praxis of Socially Engaged Contemplation
1.	Consider the concrete teaching situation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What am I coming to notice about this child and her/his social context shaped economically, culturally and politically? • What am I coming to see are the particular needs of this child?
2.	Contemplate the element of mystery within it	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where am I seeing the presence of the divine in this child? • What prevents me from seeing the presence of the divine in this child? • What assumptions about this child and who I am as an adult educator are being disrupted? How have these assumptions been shaped by society? • How am I led to rethink or even let go of these assumptions so that I can teach more justly from a place that upholds this child’s dignity? • What am I noticing for the first time about this child that I have not seen?
3.	Make a renewed commitment to transform the present reality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What might be that glimpse of newness I am coming to see of my vocation as a teacher? • Which aspects of who I am as a teacher are being affirmed and/or challenged by this child? • What opportunities might I create in my classroom and as a school community that allow this child to be seen and heard, engaging her/his participation to build up the common good?
4.	Be open to reality of God	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What structural changes might I propose for these opportunities to be realized?

These questions underline a central dynamic in Lasallian prophetic mysticism or mystical realism: the process of educating justly is rooted in an ongoing conversion by the

teacher to each child in the classroom as God's child. This conversion is a journey that requires the teacher to be open to moments of disruption in their encounters with children. The challenge is to see such disruptions as opportunities for pause and a discernment of their educational priorities, commitments and convictions.

5. Conclusions

In this article, I mine the Lasallian tradition for a prophetic mysticism that integrates contemplation with the public activity of teaching children justly as prophetic witness in contemporary Catholic education. This retrieval is significant in relation to: (i) a preferential option for children called from within the turn to children and childhood in contemporary theological research; and (ii) the renewal of religious charisms for God's mission through Catholic education. Building on Gerald Grace's concept of 'spiritual capital', Lydon (2021) argues how it can be fruitfully sustained when charisms of Religious Orders are lived and modeled by religious and committed lay people. I agree with this emphasis on the "primacy of witness" (p. 77). Integral to such witness must also be a contemplative way of seeing and relating with others, in discernment of where the Spirit is calling us to in mission. What the Lasallian charism offers to Catholic education is a prophetic mysticism that calls us to be present to the Spirit in the social realities of children. It consists of a mode of discerning the prophetic contours of teaching as a Christian vocation from the standpoint of God's solidarity with children as the least amongst the poor in Christ. Teaching children justly is holy work because of the Holy One who dwells in them. To teach children justly is to hear and respond to God's call through them, who are bearers of hope in the Reign of God already here.

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Notes

- ¹ *Meditations* is a reference to De La Salle (1994). Hereafter cited in text as M., followed by the numbering used in this text.
- ² This recalls the distinction between a Pauline understanding of charism as gift for service to the common good and a Weberian notion of charismatic leadership, as discussed in Lydon (2009).
- ³ References to this pastoral letter are from *The Pastoral Letters of Br. John Johnston, FSC (1986–2000)* (Napa, CA: Lasallian Resource Center, 2016). Henceforth cited as Johnston (2016).

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