



Catechetical Sunday

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UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

Committed to Christ, the Poor, and New Evangelization

by Kenny Latta

Lasallian Volunteer

I was preparing for the start of my second year as a Lasallian volunteer, reading at random through some of the writings of St. John Baptist de La Salle, when I came across this passage: "You are co-workers with God in His work and He uses you to work for Him in the garden of your children's souls" (www.lasalle.org.hk/resources/LS/meditation.htm).

I snapped to attention immediately. I read the passage again, and then again, and I have kept it in my mind ever since. Never before had such a small piece of De La Salle's writings affected me so deeply and left me so moved and inspired to continue with his mission.

You see, all through college I was fascinated with gardening. I was never very good at it, but I loved it anyway. I would spend hours staring at bare patches of dirt, waiting anxiously for my just-sown seeds to sprout and send up their green shoots. I would water constantly, always worried that my young plants were thirsty and, in consequence, often drowning them. I would invite my friends over to admire my garden and tell me how great it was, and then we would share that one ripe

tomato that I was able to protect from the disease that had killed all the rest.

I grew a huge variety of things: tomatoes, corn, peppers, grapes, herbs, flowers, and lemons. Soon my yard was completely overrun. Every bare space that received any kind of sunlight during the day was taken over by a struggling plant that I was trying to coax to life. Some years I was successful, some years I failed, but I was always happy. Rarely did I feel more focused, creative, and satisfied than when I was gardening under the sun of the humid Memphis summer.

Now, as a Lasallian volunteer, I staff the Academic Support Center at La Salle Academy, an all-boys Catholic high school on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. There is little room for gardening, so I put that energy into my service. I tutor the students, usually in math and science.

The students at La Salle are generally the sons of immigrants or are immigrants themselves. Many of them come from families and neighborhoods around New York City that are steeped in poverty, sickness, and violence. They come to La Salle to find sanctuary. The

school is a safe and nurturing place where they can develop into educated and compassionate young men.

In this sense, then, La Salle is a very Lasallian institution. It exists as a testament to faith in the Lasallian mission: faith in the power of a human and Christian education to uplift the souls of the poor. As a Lasallian volunteer, I feel very privileged to be a part of it.

I think that is why the passage from De La Salle strikes a chord in me. The image of us as gardeners working alongside God to create a place that nurtures and nourishes the souls of those we serve is consistent with my experience and expressed in terms that I can understand. In my work, sometimes I feel successful, sometimes I feel that I have failed, but I am rarely more focused, creative, and satisfied

than when I am tutoring a student on the Lower East Side of Manhattan.

I am fortunate to be able to watch our students grow, mature, and bear fruits—fruits like their self-confidence, achievements, and happiness—and to be around to share in the joy of those fruits with them.

Shouting, they shall mount the heights of Zion,
they shall come streaming to the LORD's blessings:

The grain, the wine, and the oil,
the sheep and the oxen;
They themselves shall be like
watered gardens,
never again shall they languish.
(Jer 31:12)

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