

The Dangerous Memory of Brother Charles Crouzet, FSC

Charles Legendre, AFSC

I teach at The Saint Paul's School (Covington, LA), a school with a Brother-Principal, a community of five Brothers who work in the school, and a retirement community of twelve Brothers who live on campus. For those who teach here, for the parents who send their children here, for the alumni, for the students—this is a Brothers' school. Saint Paul's is the last school in the New Orleans-Santa Fe District with a Brother-Principal. If one did not know about situations in the greater Lasallian world and if Saint Paul's were the only glimpse of the state of the Christian Brothers' world, questions concerning Lasallian formation, shared mission, association, and leadership would seem less than urgent.

But I am aware of the larger picture. I know the fragility of a situation where the movement of one Brother into District leadership would cause a complete restructuring of our protected world at Saint Paul's. I am aware of the precarious position of the New Orleans-Santa Fe District, a District facing daunting financial challenges to meet the needs of the retired Brothers and to face potentially crippling lawsuits.

When I go to work in the morning, I step onto a beautiful, forty-acre campus and into a classroom where Brothers and their colleagues have been teaching since 1918. Saint Paul's is a well-run school, an effective, stabilizing force in the life of many young men. Yet, on the horizon, great uncertainty looms. Will the New Orleans-Santa Fe District survive? Will Saint

Paul's remain Lasallian? My years as a student in the Brothers' schools and my twenty-three years as a teacher at Saint Paul's provide the context for this reflection on questions of association.

As we Brothers and colleagues face an uncertain future, stories come to mind that both challenge and offer hope. David Tracy has noted the importance of narrative: "Essentially, a church is a community that keeps alive the dangerous memories of its classics." Bernard Lee once commented that classics are not "timeless" texts but texts that are "perennially timely."

The classics of the Lasallian world surround the narrative of the life of the Founder, John Baptist de La Salle. All involved in a Lasallian institution confront the "dangerous memories" found in the stories of Saint La Salle's often struggling, often failing attempts to open and run gratuitous schools. A dangerous memory has the ability to jar a community and clarify its mission. A dangerous memory calls for a response. The concept of the gratuitous school itself is a dangerous memory that has prompted an explosion of grace in the Lasallian world in the form of San Miguel and Cristo Rey schools.

At this juncture in the life of The Saint Paul's School and the New Orleans-Santa Fe District, I believe that the story of Brother Charles Crouzet, a member of the founding community at Saint Paul's, provides a timely and dangerous memory that offers hope and a challenge. Brother Charles' story is kept alive on campus by those who knew him, by the Brothers whose community took the name

“The Crouzet Community” in his memory, and in the local chapter of the National Honor Society, known at Saint Paul’s as the Brother Charles Crouzet Chapter.

Each year, at the induction ceremony of the Brother Charles Crouzet Chapter of the National Honor Society, Brother Raymond Bulliard, the principal of Saint Paul’s, tells the story of the circuitous route Brother Charles took from his native France to Covington, Louisiana.

I’ve heard the story many times, and each year I am struck anew by the courage, tenacity, faith, and vision of the Brothers who founded Saint Paul’s. In 1967, Brother Ephrem Hebert answered the call by Brother–Principal Francis Beck to write a history of Saint Paul’s on the occasion of its golden anniversary. Chapter three of *The Saint Paul’s Story*, “The Coming of the Christian Brothers,” chronicles the journey of Brother Charles and other founding Brothers:

The coming of the Christian Brothers to Saint Paul’s, the golden jubilee of which event prompted the writing of this history, was a most unprepossessing occurrence. Perhaps never had an institution such as Saint Paul’s been taken over by a group of men more unlikely to succeed than the nineteen French Brothers who arrived in 1918. These men were all exiles. They had voluntarily left their native France in 1904 rather than discontinue living the religious life in an integral manner. They went to Mexico, learned a new language, and soon had a flourishing school system going. In 1914 a group of Mexican bandits overran the territory where their schools were located, and they again had to choose exile. This time Mexico’s loss was the U.S.’s gain, for they were accepted into several houses of the Brothers of the United States. Once again they labored to learn a foreign tongue, this one ever so much more difficult than Spanish. . . .

They had studied English assiduously and knew the grammar well, but most of them spoke it with a heavy accent. They

came to take over the administration of an institution which had a very high reputation for discipline and learning, from a group of priests with fourteen centuries of educational tradition, highly respected in their local community, of German descent and sympathy, at the height of a worldwide conflict which pitted the best of Germany against the best of France. [Benedictine priests of Saint Joseph Abbey had run Saint Paul’s School from 1911 to 1918.]

These black-robed friars were completely unknown in this town of Louisiana, their forebears having perished in the terrible epidemics of New Orleans and Pass Christian three decades before. They had to come secretly, almost by stealth, so as not to inflame the passions of the citizens, and perhaps the Benedictines themselves, because the changeover was bound to be unpopular all around. That they did come to Louisiana and to Covington under the circumstances, that they did take over the administration and direction of the school, was nothing short of heroic; that they succeeded in the undertaking was positively miraculous.

“These men were all exiles.”

Brother Charles and his community left the security of their homeland when the French government told them that if they chose to remain in France, they could no longer live as a religious community and work in the Christian Schools. These Brothers chose exile for the sake of the mission.

We Brothers and colleagues choose exile today as we step away from the comfort of the structures that have given us stability and direction for so long. For some institutions, this means that the Brothers’ community has withdrawn from the school—leaving colleagues who strive to maintain its Lasallian character. Programs like the Lasallian Leadership Institute and the Buttimer Institute have prepared many well to take the initiative in maintaining the

Lasallian character of the school; however, this is new—and foreign—territory for the lay colleague. The vision of shared mission that the General Chapter of 1993 delineated is beginning to take tangible shape, but we are mapping new territory.

In the case of the New Orleans–Santa Fe District, we realize that the District will not be able to provide for the association of schools as it once had. Whereas the District’s provincial staff once designed and supported the mechanisms of association among the schools of the District, we are entering a time when more and more of the burden of association among schools of the District must be borne by the schools—both financially and from the standpoint of initiative and leadership. Even were the situation in the New Orleans–Santa Fe District less dire, the dream of shared mission would propel the Institute toward more collaborative, grassroots association among its institutions. The current situation drives our “exile” toward an end that has yet to come into focus.

I suppose that Brother Charles and his colleagues who came to Saint Paul’s in 1918 found comfort and inspiration in the story of Saint La Salle, who also chose a road of exile. Saint La Salle’s continual steps into the work of the Christian Schools caused alienation from his own family. His insistence that the education of poor children be both religious and practical put him at odds with the educational structures of his day. His constant battles for control over his schools and his insistence that lay Brothers are, in fact, “ministers of Jesus Christ” inflamed the ecclesiastical powers of his day.

“They learned a new language.”

The thorniest of all issues surrounding association seems to be the danger of definition, yet the articulation of our mission and of our role in it remains a critical step in advancing rather than retracting. Saint La Salle realized that as he set out onto the foreign territory of the gratuitous school, he needed a new language. Jean-Baptiste Blain, De La Salle’s early biographer,

quotes the Founder from an address he made at an assembly in 1686:

Now that you have reached the point where I wished to lead you and I can testify to your fervor and pious dispositions, *I wish to undertake measures with you to stabilize your state of life, to strengthen you in your vocation, to consolidate your union with one another, and to begin building the edifice of which you are the foundation stones.*

(Blain, *Life of John Baptist de La Salle*, book 2, chapter 2, 174; emphasis added)

I wholeheartedly agree with Brother John Johnston’s warnings that titles can create a house divided: imagine a faculty where some carry the title “Lasallian educator” and others do not, or where some recite a vow to the school and others do not. However, each institution must have a *critical mass* of individuals who understand and nurture the Lasallian mission. The formalization of the critical mass seems to be taking some shape by way of the Lasallian Leadership Institute, the Buttimer Institute, and affiliation. There is an increasing demand that those who have made these programs or who are affiliated members take a larger role as formators at their schools and other institutions.

Just as Brother Charles learned new languages as he was bounced from country to country, we need a new vocabulary to articulate and support what binds a lay colleague to the work of a Lasallian school. I suggest that individual institutions begin with defined roles that call the lay colleague to leadership in care of the school’s spiritual life and Lasallian formation. Perhaps every Lasallian school needs a person in the role of Lasallian Formator. Perhaps there should be a Lasallian Life Committee composed of several faculty members.

Another critical level of association is the bond of the institutions to one another. The 43rd General Chapter (2000) recognized the need for a new language of association among

the individual institutions within the District by requiring the establishment of a Mission Council of Brothers and lay colleagues. The function of the Mission Council is to maintain and nurture the Lasallian educational mission in current and future ministries. Districts in the USA/Toronto Region are currently writing by-laws and forming these new structures of association.

“Nothing Short of Heroic”

As Brother Ray tells the story of Brother Charles at the National Honor Society induction, he calls the name of a student and challenges him with a question like, “Joe, are you willing to leave your comfortable surroundings for the sake of the Gospel?” Of course, the student squirms in his seat while considering the ramifications of the question—and so do I. It seems as though the really heroic work of Saint Paul’s lay in founding the school, in those first decades when Brothers had to win the support of local families and survive on little income.

My life at Saint Paul’s, although hectic, has been quite comfortable. I wonder whether any of my twenty-three years at Saint Paul’s has been heroic. I wonder whether the years ahead will demand heroism. I’m reminded of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s notion that there is no such thing as “cheap grace”—that there is a cost to Christian discipleship. The story of Brother Charles indicates to me that faithfulness to the authentic Lasallian mission requires heroism. I admire the heroic steps taken by the Brothers of the Institute toward the dream of shared mission. I recognize that embracing this vision and creating new structures have been steps of faith: reliance on the Providence of God.

“I will never forget them.”

My knowledge of Brother Charles is not limited to the stories told of him. When I first arrived at Saint Paul’s in 1981, Brother Charles was still living in the Brothers’ house on campus. When I first met him, he was 95 years old. I saw him shuffling mostly around the Brothers’ residence,

and I saw the love and devotion of Brother Alfred (then the physics teacher in the school), who took care of Brother Charles.

In 1982, Brother Charles needed more medical care than the Brothers could provide at their campus residence. He was going to move to their retirement community in Lafayette. On the morning of the move, Brother Jeffrey Calligan had the student body line the driveway to way good-bye. The owner of Holden’s gas station donated the ambulance ride for Brother Charles. As the ambulance was moving through campus, Brother Charles asked the driver to stop so that he could speak with Brother Jeffrey. He told him to relay this message to the students: “Tell them that I will never forget them.”

The words “I will never forget them” are enshrined at the base of the statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Founders’ Circle on campus. Perhaps Brother Charles’ words were not meant for the students of Saint Paul’s alone. Perhaps he uttered a prophetic word for all of us working “together and by association” for the Lasallian Mission, and with that assurance Brothers and colleagues together will walk forward.

Brother Ephrem concludes his account of the route of the founding Brothers of Saint Paul’s with this sentence:

That they did come to Louisiana and to Covington under the circumstances, that they did take over the administration and direction of the school, was nothing short of heroic; that they succeeded in the undertaking was positively miraculous.

May the future *History of the Lasallian Mission in the 21st Century* end similarly.

— • — • — • —

Charles Legendre has been teacher, coach, and campus minister at The Saint Paul’s School for 24 years. He lives in Covington (LA) with his wife, Jane, and two sons, Oneal and Michael. Charles is the New Orleans–Santa Fe District representative on the Regional Education Board.