

Coming Home

Rita Maloney

I do not know how old I was when I first heard about God, but what I do know is that once I heard, I was immediately interested in knowing more. I can honestly say that throughout my entire life, this interest never wavered. As a child, I loved to hear Jewish Bible stories and the stories of the Gospels. I became the characters and went through their pains and glories. I delighted in this man, Jesus, whom the Sisters told me was also God. I was touched by his love for children and his compassion for the poor, the sick, and the oppressed. I was impressed by his courage to speak the truth and his insistence on withdrawing from the crowds to go into the mountains to pray to Abba and to remain centered in Him.

When I heard and read these stories, I truly entered into them completely. I was an Apostle, and I traveled with Jesus. I listened, and I learned. I was a close friend of Jesus, and I would go to him with my doubts and my concerns, my worries and my fears. I even imagined Jesus coming to me when he needed to be heard, encouraged, and supported, and I delighted in being there for him.

As I grew older, I carried this view with me. This was who I was, and this was what my world was about. But I was presented with another reality in church. I was reminded that the twelve Apostles were all men and that only boys could be altar servers and priests, based on the tradition of Jesus' choosing only male Apostles. I sat in church on one side of the rail and watched the priest and the altar servers on the

other side. They, I began to believe, were closer to God than I was.

I struggled with the fear of damnation and had fears of being excommunicated for not agreeing with everything I was told was true. I learned not to question or challenge but to listen and not create a stir. I grew angry, but when I dared on a few occasions to speak up and challenge, I realized how uncomfortable people became, so eventually, frustrated myself, I stepped away from the church and looked for spiritual nourishment in other places.

I studied Talmud with Jewish teachers, attended the lectures of Elie Wiesel, and read about the great biblical characters. I attended workshops with Rabbi Zalman Schacter and read Jewish writers. I read books of Paramahansa Yogananda and Satchidinanda, great Hindu mystics. I read poetry by the Sufi mystic, Rumi. I attended lectures and workshops on any subject that would help me heal some of the painful experiences in my life. I studied with the Unity minister, Eric Butterworth, and I studied *A Course in Miracles*. I completed my Master's Degree in Scripture at Fordham University. But I still did not feel at home in the church.

I also felt homesick, for I had loved the church when I was young. It meant a great deal to me. Yet, I knew that I could not be myself there. I could not say what I really felt or share my ideas with people. I got angry at the attitude toward women and the lack of interest in the voice of the people. As grateful as I was for

my studies in different religions, I had no spiritual home.

In the summer of 1985, I was asked if I was interested in teaching Religion at Bishop Loughlin High School. Although my immediate answer was “no,” I reconsidered, simply for practical reasons. I had two children at that time, and I thought it might be a good thing to have the same schedule as theirs: work days, 9 to 3; summers and holidays off. For these reasons I applied and was accepted as a Religion teacher at Bishop Loughlin.

Some of my colleagues were Brothers, and I spoke with them about certain issues that I was struggling with regarding the church. They too were questioning many of the same things. I began to hear selections from the writings of Saint John Baptist de La Salle that touched me to the depth of my being.

I had loved many lives of the saints when I was a child, but these Lasallian writings were about the spirituality of teaching and were so relevant to my work in the classroom. The words were fluid and harmonious, practical and mystical, and my soul was stirred when I heard them. The school also had palpable spirit: caring teacher-student relationships, supportive colleagues and administration. The students were attentive to prayer in the morning and before each class. The religion textbooks published by Saint Mary’s Press, a Christian Brothers press in Minnesota, were impressive. Religion was presented in a way that considered the students’ experiences. Students were listened to and challenged, not talked at. Students had many opportunities to make a retreat, where they were listened to, with no effort to change them but to gently lead them.

This was the church that I loved, and I was truly grateful for the opportunity to teach Religion at Bishop Loughlin High School. Many teachers and Brothers were an example to me of integrity, of living out the Gospels in concrete ways. I learned that La Salle told teachers that they are “ambassadors of Jesus Christ” in the classroom and that their work as teachers is truly a call from God to touch the hearts of their

students. When I read La Salle’s writings, I felt as though I knew him. I never cease to be amazed at the practicality and compassion of his words, both simple and profound. These writings inspired my first years of teaching.

I was invited to address the Brothers of the Long Island–New England District on Shared Mission. A short time later, I was invited to attend the Buttimer Institute to study the life, pedagogy, and spirituality of Saint John Baptist de La Salle. While I was at Buttimer, I sensed that I was coming home. I loved my teachers and the participants—other Lasallian teachers and Brothers from schools throughout the country. This truly was the church that I loved. There were no constrictions as far as questioning, challenging, and being myself with all my doubts, fears, insights, and limitations. No sooner did I complete the three-year program of Buttimer than I was invited to attend the Lasallian Leadership Institute. Indeed, I had found the church that I loved. I shared in the Lasallian story, and I wanted to be a part of the Lasallian family.

When the studies ended, however, it was difficult. I missed being part of a prayer community with people who studied, searched, and prayed together. The prayers had been so relevant to our work with students. I enjoyed the celebration of Mass and was invited to give a homily. I felt part of a living, vibrant community. But when I returned to Brooklyn, I missed the prayer community that had been such a rich experience for me. I tried to create prayer services in the morning before school, but this was just not a priority for other very good teachers. I wanted to be part of a Lasallian community, to live in the spirit of faith and zeal with them, and to share the Lasallian mission and the living out of the Gospels in the education of youth. The experiences of the Buttimer Institute and the Lasallian Leadership Institute were, for me, a taste of the kingdom. Not having an ongoing sense of community, study, and prayer was a tremendous letdown.

I believe that I am already committed to the work of the Lasallian mission. Bishop

Loughlin High School is a wonderful school community. Yet, I have greater need for prayer, companionship, and continued study. I need to feel part of a larger community of Lasallian partners and Brothers working together. I have considered becoming an associated member simply because I love the charism of Saint John Baptist de La Salle and the Lasallian mission throughout the world. I would like to direct my talents and abilities to the work of this mission.

However, if I were associated, I think I would like to see some structure in place that would ensure ongoing prayer, study, and some sense of lived community. I don't know exactly how it would be. That is the struggle right now for many of us who would like to be associated. The problem is that there are a few in New Jersey, some in Pennsylvania, some in Rhode Island, and some in New York—all very busy in their work and not close enough to one another to get together regularly. Will association be only lay colleagues coming together? What will our relationship be to the Brothers? Will we be equal partners in association? These are the questions I have, but I have very few answers at this time.

As I close this short paper, I have in front of me on my desk a quote from John Baptist de La Salle that seems most relevant for a summation:

Stir up your trust in the Lord's infinite goodness, and honor God by leaving in the divine hands the care of your persons. Be not troubled about the present or disquieted about the future, but be concerned only about the moment you must now live. Do not let anticipation of tomorrow be a burden on the day that is passing. What you lack in the evening, the morrow will bring you, if you know how to hope in God.

(Blain, *Life of John Baptist de La Salle*,
book one, chapter 11, 106)



This article is adapted from *Five Essays on Lasallian Lay Association* (Adamstown, MD: Baltimore District, 2004). Rita Maloney is in her twentieth year of teaching religion at Bishop Loughlin Memorial High School in Brooklyn, NY. Rita has completed both the Buttimer Institute and the Lasallian Leadership Institute.