

**Contemplating the Christ Child for Imagining a Christian Educational Vision that
Liberates Children**

Alfred K M Pang

Boston College School of Theology and Ministry

Abstract:

As theological educators, how are we responding to the death and suffering of the world's children caused by human agency? Are we moved beyond anguish to be indignant at the various forms of injustice committed against children? To what extent has theology made room for children as its subject in today's troubled world? This paper considers how the Christ Child, as a focus of contemplation, can be formative in shaping our theological, moral, and pedagogical imagination for children's liberation. It retrieves and interprets the significance of the Christ Child in John Baptist De La Salle's *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer* and his *Meditations*, arguing for their contemporary relevance in nourishing a Christian educational vision that makes room for the rights of children to be taken seriously.

In 2012, I was a teacher intern at a Catholic elementary and middle school in Boston. My most memorable experience was guiding the children to reflect on the Stations of the Cross. On reading their reflections, I was not only surprised at the spiritual depth of these children, but also disturbed by the extent of loss and grief experienced by the young that often goes unnoticed. That year, the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Connecticut happened, followed by the Boston Marathon Bombing the next year. Etched in my mind is the image of Martin Richard, a third grader who, before his untimely death at the marathon, had held up a sign saying “No more hurting people. Peace.” Last year, in September, the photograph of a three-year-old Syrian boy drowned and washed up on a beach in Turkey went viral, triggering international attention on the plight of refugees fleeing from ISIS. Do the lives of children ‘speak’ only when they are dead? Are we moved beyond anguish to be indignant at the various forms of injustice committed against children? Their suffering, it seems, is easily forgotten. Their voices, if not silenced, do not sustain public interest. These observations unsettle me as a theological educator. They set me thinking about how theologians and Christian educators ought to be responding to the suffering of children caused by human agency. Does not the reign of God belong to children (cf. Mark 10:14)?¹ To what extent has theology made room for children as its subject in today’s troubled world? Have we taken seriously the injunction to welcome children as God would to the least and vulnerable, and how might we imagine education for the liberation of children?

Following Douglas Sturm, I understand children’s liberation as the emancipation of children from structural conditions that trivialize their lives, exploit their vulnerability, and

¹ All quotations from scripture will be taken from The New Interpreter’s Study Bible (New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha).

violate their human dignity. It works toward structural transformation in order to promote the human flourishing of children *as* children, protective of their vulnerability while engaging them as “creative agents.”² As Sturm highlights, “Children are not merely a neutral stuff to be shaped and molded through socialization, but are themselves sources of novel possibility and surprise.”³ In this regard, a pedagogy toward children’s liberation aims to recognize children’s creative agency in a context while critiquing the ways in which their experiences of childhood could have been distorted, manipulated, and/or silenced by adult perspectives. The task is not to discount the role of adults in nurturing the lives of children, but to raise critical consciousness of their position of power in relation to the young, working out ways to intentionally include and engage the co-participation of children voices as citizens and disciples, in co-creatorship with God.

In this paper, I suggest that a Christian educational vision that liberates children is nourished and deepened by a prophetic mysticism centered on the Christ Child. The presupposition here is that mysticism is indissolubly tied to political action, opening our eyes to see and act against oppressive structures, and to re-imagine their transformation for the advancement of God’s reign of life and justice in the present. As German feminist liberation theologian Dorothee Söelle has argued, “Resistance is not the outcome of mysticism, resistance is mysticism itself.”⁴ Seen in this light, contemplating the Christ Child in the mystery of the Incarnation holds significance for children’s liberation.

² Douglas Sturm, “On the Suffering and Rights of Children: Toward a Theology of Childhood Liberation,” *Cross Currents* (Summer 1992): 150, 158.

³ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁴ Dorothee Söelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, trans. Barbara & Martin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 199.

I am not the first to associate the Christ Child with children's liberation. Mystic, poet and popular religious writer Caryll Houselander published in 1949 *The Passion of the Infant Child*, where she wrote, "The Divine Child takes upon Himself the characteristic sorrows of the race in which He abides. In His infancy in us, He is identified with the suffering that our sins have inflicted on children."⁵ Her point here is two-fold: the first a recognition of the infant Christ's solidarity with the suffering of children, which leads us to the second, a conversion from our complicity in the systematic marginalization and abandonment of children. Similarly, theologian Margaret Guider points to the "radical discipleship" demanded by the "experience of standing in the shadow of the manger."⁶ In the Christ Child, God reveals God-self as utterly dependent on the care and protection from adults. It is also in and through this dependence that we recognize the interdependence between children and adults as human persons in community. Thus, to stand in the manger's shadow is to behold God's radical dependent interdependency in the infant Child, calling forth a community of discipleship that sees solidarity with the world's children as an ethical imperative, not only to care for them, but also to "include and take seriously children's perceptions of what it means to share in the mission of Jesus Christ."⁷

Where this paper makes a contribution is to lift up the educational witness of John Baptist De La Salle in 17th-century France, and arguing for his contemporary relevance in shaping and nourishing a Christian educational vision that takes seriously the rights of children in service of

⁵ Republished as Caryll Houselander, *Wood of the Cradle, Wood of the Cross: The Little Way of the Infant Jesus* (Manchester, New Hampshire: Sophia Institute Press, 1995), 116-117.

⁶ Margaret Eletta Guider, "Living in the Shadow of the Manger: Mission, Ecumenism, and the State of the World's Children," *Word and World* Vol. XVIII, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 183.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 182.

the Word Incarnate that liberates. A French priest and theologian, De La Salle founded the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools in 1680. In 1950, fifty years after his canonization, he was declared the patron saint of all teachers of youth. De La Salle's writings present an educational mission that demonstrates a preferential option for children, especially those who are poor through the establishment of gratuitous schools.⁸ According to De La Salle, Christian educators are "ambassadors and ministers of Jesus Christ" (*M* 195.2),⁹ "cooperators with Jesus Christ for the salvation of children" (*M* 196). The young "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). For De La Salle, spirituality is not an add-on that enhances teaching. Rather, teaching as "work that requires you to touch hearts" (*M* 43.3) *is* in itself a spiritual act of faith that witnesses to Christ's presence in the relationship between the educator and students. Prayer is not only integral to teaching as ministry; teaching *is* prayer lived outward from within, in and through the Spirit. De La Salle's theology of education, which emerged from his struggle with poverty and

⁸ Luke Salm, FSC, *The Work is Yours: The Life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle* (Romeoville, Illinois: Christian Brothers Publications, 1989), 57. "For De La Salle and the Brothers gratuity of instruction was a fundamental principle. This not only provided a quality education for the poor, but also guaranteed that no distinction would be made in the school between those who could afford to pay and those who could not."

⁹ John Baptist De La Salle, *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*, trans. Richard Arandez, FSC, and Augustine Loes, FSC, ed. Augustine Loes, FSC, and Francis Huether, FSC (Landover, Md.: Lasallian Publications, 1994). Specific references to De La Salle's *Meditations* are hereafter cited in text as *M*, followed by the meditation number and section standardized in the anthology.

outreach to poor children in schools,¹⁰ is rooted in and sustained by what theologian and Lasallian scholar Michel Sauvage has described as De La Salle's "mystical realism."¹¹

By *mystical realism*, Sauvage means that De La Salle's source of spirituality is in "the lived experience of God, but an experience that is reinterpreted, reconstructed and relocated in the context of the history of salvation."¹² Lasallian educators, then, are to remember that God is encountered as Presence in the existential conditions of their lives, in the everyday of educational activity as co-creatorship with God's Spirit, walking with the young on the journey of

discipleship.¹³ Sauvage outlines a four-fold rhythm to this mystical realism:

1. Consider the concrete teaching situation.
2. Contemplate the element of mystery involved within it.
3. Make a renewed commitment to transform the present reality.
4. Be open to the transcendent and freely given Ultimate.¹⁴

In practice, this four-fold rhythm is more iterative and cyclical rather than linear. It expresses a sacramental vision of God's active presence permeating the world. It also expands one's prophetic imagination for transformative praxis in the third movement. Lasallian pedagogy is thus socially sensitive, grounding its work for educational justice in a prophetic spirituality

¹⁰ For a systematic conception of De La Salle as a theologian of education, see Enrique Garcia Ahumada, FSC, "De La Salle and the theology of education," trans. Peter Gilfedder, FSC, *MEL Bulletin* 47 (February 2013).

¹¹ Michel Sauvage, FSC, *The Gospel Journey of John Baptist De La Salle (1651-1719)*, trans. Luke Salm, FSC. Lecture at the Center of St. Louis of France in Rome on December 11, 1984: 5.

¹² Sauvage, *The Gospel Journey of John Baptist De La Salle*, 7.

¹³ De La Salle frequently refers to children as "disciples" in his *Meditations* (e.g. *M* 195.1, 196.1, 198.2)

¹⁴ Sauvage, *The Gospel Journey of John Baptist De La Salle*, 5.

rooted in Jesus Christ of the Gospel. I highlight here De La Salle's attention on Christ's infancy as one focal point of mystical realism in his spiritual writings.

In his *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*, written to guide the Brothers on the practice of "the prayer of simple attention,"¹⁵ De La Salle developed a process of recollecting God's presence, reflecting on the mystery of Christ in the gospel and how it is to be lived, and ending in thanksgiving. Noteworthy are the multiple reflections De La Salle composed on the Christ Child to illustrate the process of considering a mystery in faith. Below is an example:

"Yes, my God, I believe that you became a little child out of love of me. You were born in a stable and you lay on straw and hay in darkest night and in the depths of winter. Your love for me reduced you to this state of poverty and wretchedness and to such extreme destitution that nothing like it had ever been heard of before. O my Lord, I believe all these truths that faith teaches me about your love for me ... Your infinite wisdom judged it much more advantageous for you to give me in your adorable Person the example of the kind of life I must live and the path I must follow [...] This is what I am resolved to do, O my loving Savior ... O my God, I beg you to help me in my weakness, which is so overwhelming when I wish to act. Grant me the grace to imitate you, which you have won for me in this mystery."¹⁶

The language is personal, passionate and intense. For De La Salle, prayer is a creative dialogue with God who is close to us out of gratuitous grace. His reflection here on the Christ Child as the revelation of God's kenotic love is also an embrace of spiritual childhood, which nourishes the lived commitment to evangelical poverty as a form of prophetic witness. This coupling of the interior life with prophetic action is seen more clearly when we read this prayer in conjunction with De La Salle's meditation on the Feast of the Epiphany:

"Recognize Jesus beneath the poor rags of the children whom you have to instruct. Adore him in them. Love poverty and honor the poor after the example of the Magi, for poverty

¹⁵ Donald Mouton, FSC, "Introduction" to John Baptist De La Salle, *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer* [orig: 1739], ed. & revised trans. Donald Mouton, FSC (Landover, Md: Lasallian Publications, 2007), 1.

¹⁶ John Baptist De La Salle, *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer* [orig: 1739], ed. and revised trans. Donald Mouton, FSC (Landover, Md: Lasallian Publications, 2007), 86-87.

should be dear to you who are responsible for the instruction of the poor. May faith lead you to do this with affection and zeal, because the children are the members of Jesus Christ. In this way this divine Savior will be pleased with you, and you will find him, because he always loved the poor and poverty.” (M 96.3)

In contemplating the Infant Christ as Word Incarnate, the Brothers and by extension, all Lasallian educators, are challenged to be seekers, just as the Magi were, on a journey of conversion to the poor child in Christ. Conversion to the poor child in Christ calls Christian educators to be in solidarity with children in resisting and transforming structures that keep them in dehumanizing situations of impoverishment. In a sense, the Christian educational mission for children’s liberation is already present in the Lasallian tradition. This begins when we are stirred by our radical astonishment at the prophetic action of God, who stepped out of God-self not only to be poor amongst us, but also as a vulnerable child with us. God *has* a childhood that calls for protection and care. Where children are among the most vulnerable and the most victimized of peoples, the whole body of Christ suffers, and this body came to encounter us as an infant in Jesus Christ, whose birth was met with rejection and violence. How, then, might we be in awe of the Christ Child beyond the Christmas season, and in what ways does the Christ Child disturb our theological, moral and pedagogical imagination in defense of children’s rights today? Do we hear in the cry of the Infant Jesus a call for comfort that listens attentively to children, protecting and upholding their full human dignity as gift to the world?

Works Cited

- Ahumada, Enrique Garcia, FSC, “De La Salle and the theology of education.” Translated by Peter Gilfedder, FSC. *MEL Bulletin* 47 (February 2013).
- Capelle, Nicolas, FSC. “The religious institute of Catholic education: the Brothers of the Christian Schools in the twentieth century.” *International Studies in Catholic Education* Vol. 4 No. 1 (March 2012): 68-81.
- De La Salle, John Baptist. *Meditations*. Translated by Richard Arnandez, FSC, and Augustine Loes, FSC. Edited by Augustine Loes, FSC, and Francis Huether, FSC. Landover, Maryland: Lasallian Publications, 1994.
- De La Salle, John Baptist. *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*. Edited and revised translation by Donald Mouton, FSC. Landover, Maryland: Lasallian Publications, 2007.
- Guider, Margaret Eletta. “Living in the Shadow of the Manger: Mission, Ecumenism, and the State of the World’s Children.” *Word & World* Vol. XVIII No. 2 (Spring 1998): 179-186.
- Houselander, Caryll. *Wood of the Cradle, Wood of the Cross*. Manchester, New Hampshire: Sophia Institute Press, 1995. (Originally published as *The Passion of the Infant Christ*)
- Salm, Luke, FSC. *The Work is Yours: The Life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle*. Romeoville, Illinois: Christian Brothers Publications, 1989.
- Sauvage, Michel, FSC. *The Gospel Journey of John Baptist De La Salle (1651-1719)*. Translated and adapted by Luke Salm, FSC. Lecture at the Center of St. Louis of France, Rome, December 11, 1984.
- Söelle, Dorothee. *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*. Translated by Barbara and Martin Rumscheidt. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001.
- Sturm, Douglas. “On the Suffering and Rights of Children.” *Cross Currents* Summer 1992: 149-173.
- The New Interpreter’s Study Bible (New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha)*
Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003.
- Van Grieken, George, FSC. “Soul for Soul – the Vocation of the Child in Lasallian Pedagogy.” In *The Vocation of the Child*, edited by Patrick McKinley Brennan, 357-380. Grand Rapids, Michigan and Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008.

