

## ASSOCIATION: FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS

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### ABSTRACT

Lasallian Association raises a number of fundamental questions for the Brothers and Lasallians in the 21st century. That is, for what, why and how, these constitute the key axes of reflection that present themselves in order to focus the discussion.

**Key words:** Association, mission, Brothers, Laypersons.

### WHAT?

1. Dictionaries of the time of De La Salle define association as *a social contract by which two or more persons are joined* by a common interest, with a view to a common purpose: *mutual aid, action in common, a more organised life* (Trévoux).

2. In Lasallian terms, the expression adopted since the beginning and repeated until today is: *together and by association for...* In it there are - even in somewhat redundant form - elements of that definition which dictionaries of the era give for association. It presents the idea of people:

2.1 united one with another, with the sentiment of being a body, by pooling natural gifts and the knowledge and skills acquired;

2.2 making a contract, linked freely and assuming a reciprocal commitment and looking to an interest, a common purpose, a collective project;

2.3 and that they are not acting in isolation and by personal initiative, but carrying out their project in solidarity and with subsidiarity.

3. In particular, in the beginnings of the Institute (1691), three people - De La Salle, and two Brothers, *unanimously and by agreement*, pledged themselves to do what they believed *to be for the good of the Society* i.e. for its definitive consolidation.

Later on (1694) there were thirteen - De La Salle and twelve Brothers - who, pronouncing the name of each one of those making vows with them, also pledged *to keep, together and by association, gratuitous schools*. Afterwards (1726) always *together and by association*, there came those who vowed to *teach gratuitously*.

Then finally others came to make a vow of *association for the service of the poor* as fourth vow (1987) and then as first vow (2007).

Moreover what they were always undertaking to do was to be effected by community discernment and by local, district, regional and global action, through dialogue and planning of religious and educational communities, councils and by District Chapters, regional assemblies and General Chapters.

4. In this historical sequence, a particularly significant moment was the emission of the first perpetual vows in 1694. It was a particularly significant moment among other reasons because of the formula used. According to this formula the two realities - *association* and *the educational service of the poor* - are not parallel realities: strictly speaking they constitute a single vow: *association* so as to ensure *gratuitous schools* gratuitous so as to allow access to them on the part of the poor.

5. A fact important to consider, in three sections:

5.1. The Lasallian associative commitment is certainly a human act. When De La Salle in 1691, chose Vuyart and Drolin as companions for the vow that we call "heroic" he chose persons who because of their qualities - zeal, courage, perseverance and attachment to their vocation (Blain I, p. 312-312) seemed to him the "most suitable for supporting the nascent community".

However such a commitment undertaken by specific human persons is not purely human by nature as any other civilian legal act. Instead of having been just an act of life it became a vowed act made to God, an act of religious consecration. Association was transformed into religious consecration. In the minutes signed on 7 June 1694 the twelve Brothers who made the first perpetual vows spoke of the *association that we entered into* by yesterday's vows. Moreover these vows all the same "transformed the primitive association of the years 1679-1683 into a religious community, even if poorly defined in relation to the canonical legislation in force " (Poutet II, p. 376. Cf. *Cahier Lasallien* 11).

5.2. All the same the root, the origin of Lasallian association is transcendental. It comes from the perception of the divine plan to assure the salvation of children far from salvation (MR 193). It is a response to the call of God to cooperate in carrying out this plan, a response of commitment, of consecration to God, a consecration made concrete and authenticated by the educational service of the most needy children of God.

In addition in this perspective as Circular 408 says (p. 60), the *body of the Institute* - that performs this service at global, regional, district and local level - is not first and foremost an organization for getting things done. "It is above all a mystery of communion that God calls together and sends forth." As well as the Institute, in the vision of the Founder (MR 194,1,2) it is an institution that God in his goodness has raised up to *remedy so great a wrong* as the abandonment of children to their own fate.

5.3. In the same way, the purpose of this Association is also not only material, earthly: access of the poor to culture and social and economic promotion. It has in mind the realization of a complete Gospel project, which includes training in the spiritual dimension, instruction, apprenticeship in moral living and Christian cultural practice.

In addition the ultimate aim of this project is the glory of God by the integral salvation of his creatures.

## 6. Purpose and centrality:

In other words association is inserted into a chain, into a hierarchy of purposes and aims.

It can be said - repeating - there are two goals that go beyond association: the educational project and the glory of God.

Association aims at the realization of the project for the support of gratuitous schools for the advancement of the poor - it is the surest and most effective way to do it.

Also the maintenance and operation of gratuitous schools for the advancement of the poor has as its purpose the glory of God - in effect it is how to promote it.

Association therefore is not at the top of the hierarchy. It is not the last factor and much less the absolute.

But, there is another possible approach: all the other vows of the Brothers in the description of the Founder (CT 2) and the current Rule (25-42b) include the perspective of mission:

- Chastity *frees the Brothers to serve people, and to dedicate themselves to the Kingdom of God* (R 27).
- By poverty *the Brothers become poor to serve the brothers better, especially the most deprived* (R 32. Cf. MF 86,3,2).
- Obedience induces the Brothers to live *in a climate of availability within a community committed to the fulfilment of the mission of the Institute* (R 36; CT 2.4).
- By stability the Brothers *obligate themselves to remain within the Institute so as to carry out its specific mission, faithful to those whom they serve in their ministry* (R 42; CT 2.3).

However concerning the vow of association, we can say that it has in view directly the end of the Institute which is mission: giving *a Christian education*, by keeping *gratuitous schools* (R 1.3 and 1.1): *by the vow of association for the educational service of the poor the Brothers undertake to maintain - as a community - schools and centres of Christian education in favour of the poor and to practise educational methods, directing them above all to lower class environments.* (R 39; cf. CT 2,1).

I think that it is above all in relation to mission that we can speak of the centrality of the vow of association and justify its precedence with regard to the other vows in the formula in which they are pronounced.

## 7. Lifestyle

In the Lasallian case, association is not only a union of persons to perform effectively the community mission of mutual commitment among those who are linked together - commitment to God through vow. It is "a dynamic of relationship, a way of being, a way of life" (Andaur, p. 72) characteristic and permanent in De La Salle and his disciples.

7.1. De La Salle "didn't wish to introduce anything through authority" (Maillefer, p. 60). "He deferred to the judgement of the Brothers and subjected to them his own ideas, opinions and choices... this is what he always did" (Blain I, p. 340). "The ongoing effort to discern the will of God and the good to be done, through the contributions of the community in prayer, dialogue, community evaluation, discussion... was the usual way of proceeding for the Founder in order to put into practice the most binding alternatives" (Presciuttini, p. 63).

7.2 "The Brothers had grasped very well what "*together and by association*" meant in theory and in practice". They showed this when:

- in 1702 they did not accept the imposition of an outside superior, not *associated* with them (Blain I, pp. 409-413);
- in 1714, they wrote to the Founder the letter which is the "culminating moment during which this lifestyle found its fullest and most explicit expression both for the Founder and for the Brothers" (Presciuttini, p. 63).

8. Today among the Brothers association remains fundamental, even characteristic. The Brothers exercise their mission *as members of a community by which they feel themselves recognized, supported and sent* (R 16).

However our association is expanding (R. 146). It is practised among ourselves and with Laypeople, who assume with us in a manner that is responsible and in solidarity the ministry of Christian education entrusted to the Institute by God within the Church (R 3).

## FOR WHAT?

1. Association at the beginning as well as today is not an end in itself. It is more a means. Or it might be said it is more in the line of a way of acting, a method, a process - including - a strategy.

2. We know perfectly well that in Lasallian beginnings it was born in view of a defined project and *completely necessary* (R 1.4): to establish, i.e. make stable, consolidate the existence of the Lasallian Institute (1691) to maintain in a corporate manner schools accessible to the poor (1694) and also to keep stable the community style of the institution being set up.

Also it is for this reason that association continues to this day so as to ensure communarily the maintaining of centres of education accessible to the poor and to develop educational methods with a view to their promotion (R 2.16.20.24.39-41.47).

3. Among Lasallians there has been unanimity in affirming as also in noting that association with lay people is a means for the continuity of the mission of the Lasallian Institute when the number of Brothers continues to decline while the works are increasing. In this observation moreover we are not alone. *Vita Consecrata* (n. 55) has the same outlook, saying that sharing the charism with the laity "will enable the assuring for the Church of the continuity of the typical services of various religious Institutes".

What is affirmed is the continuity of the mission, of "the typical services of various religious Institutes" - not of the religious Institutes themselves, at least in the form existing today, with members seeking to live a universal love in celibacy, a love available absolutely in obedience, and a gratuitous love in poverty. 30

In the Lasallian case as in others in other words the future of the mission is presumed guaranteed through lay partners. However the future of the Lasallian Institute is to be guaranteed with religious Lasallians.

The same Lasallian mission moreover, with its original motivation continuing, with its key characteristics and the spirit that animates it, will continue how long in the alternative of the absence of Lasallians Brothers? Will it not be like what has already happened, at least among us, with almost all alumni associations? While they had the presence of a Brother animator they lived. Once this Brother disappeared virtually all weakened and died.

## **WHY?**

Association always existed because of a common interest.

In the case of Lasallians, there has been interest in living out pedagogy and spirituality by association with the hope that this experience will be productive, or as experience already shows, to know that it is productive.

1. There is a deeply evangelical reason for the existence of association. In a time of selfishness and of perverse and even unfair competition, to achieve the mission of human and Christian education by concerted effort, through joint search, by dialogue, mutual aid, through forgiveness, is to give witness to the possibility of living that which is the heart of the message of Jesus, namely fraternity (R 9.23).

Wishing to see association not only as method but also as content this is where this vision would take place: association considered as "symbolizing and signifying one of the characteristics of the Reign of God, i.e. collective, community dimension" (Dullius, p. 1).

2. In association there is also powerful educational and apostolic interest. History shows that in the Lasallian Institute association, educational work is not about independent and parallel initiatives but people acting together in community. It has been and remains one of the forces that has guaranteed and continues to guarantee efficiency of the educational project, which was that of De La Salle and today is ours. It was and remains a source of ever-new answers to the ever-new realities that challenge our mission.

In this work, moreover, our Rule (39a) points out a fruitful reciprocity: if on the one hand working together in community better assures the educational activity with the poor and the development of methods for their advancement, on the other hand this double work generates community cohesion, thus underpinning the apostolic action carried out.

3. The fact of lay people working with Brothers, committed with them in the same project brings to this service not only the vision and experience of religious educators but also the vision and experience of scholars and professionals from other walks of life plus the sensitivity not only of men but also the rich sensitivity of women.

4. In addition, Brothers, side by side with men and women of a state of life other than their own can bring them to try to discern more clearly their own identity, and this can be an incentive to deepen and live more consciously and vigorously their mission of being, in the educational environment, examples of option for the absolute of God: sacraments of the universality and the gratuity of divine love, testimonies of the Christian ideal of fraternity lived by people of the most diverse geographic and ethnic origins, and the most diverse character and cultural roots. 31

5. Already it has become proverbial to say that with mission lived in an associated way; it is for the Brothers particularly to be the memory, the heart and the guarantee of the Lasallian charism. In other words they are especially responsible for keeping alive the principles, characteristics and practices of Lasallian pedagogy and spirituality, to be agents of animation of the experience of those principles, characteristics and practices; and to ensure the authenticity of its updating in today's world.

It is expected that, accepting these responsibilities, the Brothers feel encouraged - if not to say pushed - to further study, a better understanding and a more perfect experience of these principles, characteristics and practices.

6. The document *Vita Consecrata* (n. 55) notes that the participation of lay people in the works and the spiritual life of the religious "brings, not infrequently, a deepening of aspects of the charism in the Institutes of consecrated life".

Moreover this is true, even in relation to the work associated with people from other cultures and sincere practitioners of other religious faiths. In our case the presence of these people in our educational works can encourage the special increase of one or other dimension of Lasallian pedagogy and spirituality, such as attention to education as a right and need of all, cultivation of the dimension of the interiority of the person, and zeal for the cause that we embrace...

(In passing: the fact that in partnership we accept people from different cultures and religious beliefs makes it more appropriate to use the expression Lasallian Family rather than evangelical family that is used by other groups).

7. However it is not only the Institute, which is enriched by the contribution of lay people who come to share the work of the Brothers. The laity, especially Christians who want to make the teaching profession (or support it) the form by which they live their baptismal commitment, can find an alternative to achieving their wish, assuming our teaching style and our spiritual practice, style and practice which have proved effective over three centuries.

## HOW?

Some practical aspects and ways:

1. In the Lasallian beginnings there were Brothers known as "Serving Brothers" who were in charge of the material infrastructure of the Community (buying, cooking and so on). They also vowed to unite themselves and *remain in society with the Brothers with whom they were associated...*

In their formula of consecration the engagement to keep schools did not appear. Implicitly, they placed themselves at the service of the Brothers who maintained the schools.

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This makes us think about the fact that today when we talk about Lay people associated with the Brothers for the work of human and Christian education, in general we are thinking of those in administration. However in the educational works all those also participate who provide the service of support and infrastructure so that Brothers, teachers and administrators can operate calmly and efficiently.

Also they all deserve to help each other become aware of their educational role (all those who work in a centre of education are educators). Moreover they all deserve to have the Lasallian world clarified for them: its history, project, the characteristics of its education and the traits of its spirituality and that they be invited to live these according to their status. Many people will be interested and will do this very well.

2. In human groups moments of celebration are important. In this sense would it not be meaningful to perform a ceremony for the entry of Lay people into association with the Brothers, a ceremony in which are made clear the nature, sense and purpose of association and its implications...?

3. Something similar applies to the Brothers. The Rule (n.16) says that every member of the community *knows he is accepted, supported and entrusted with his mission* by it.

It would be good that this be explicitly formulated. To achieve this, at the beginning of the year each community could perform a missioning ceremony as follows: in an atmosphere of listening to the word of God and prayer:

- each Brother exchanges with the community about the activities that he is to perform during the year;
- the community, by a formula, takes note of these activities, missions the Brother to carry them out, and promises to support him in their accomplishment.

4 If Lay people along with the Brothers accept that religious life is a precious gift for the Church, that there is still *great need for* the Lasallian Congregation (RC 1.4) and that its future will be with Brothers, it will not be too much to try to help them so that they be, along with us, promoters of the Brother's vocation.

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