

# Association: An Ever-Present, Ever-Changing Reality

## “A Gift Half Understood”

Paul McAuley, FSC

I have been asked to say something about the present reality of association. In the title I describe association as an ever-present, yet ever-changing reality. I think we can apply what T. S. Eliot said about the Incarnation—“a gift half-understood”—to our gift of association. Inevitably briefly, I shall try to say something about the following aspects:

- the various meanings given to association
- reactions to recent developments
- examples of association at present being practiced
- certain inconsistencies in our thinking
- a look toward the future and the questions it raises

### **1. The various meanings given to association**

As soon as we start to speak of definition, we begin to see the confusion that presently exists: the same word is used to refer to various degrees of membership and commitment. Too often there is an automatic confusion between association, the spirit of association, and associations.

Distinction is made also as to the various levels of association (see the comments of Brother Sebá and Brother Valladolid):

a) those who are committed for their whole life—in an exclusive way associated together and forming a society;

b) those working in our schools, with dedication—but outside of the society—because they have been called to live a family life-style.

The first group represents the Brothers, the members of the Institute. The second group includes all our lay collaborators. We are told that the two groups have “different roles,” though they are not defined clearly. I shall return later to the inconsistencies in some present thinking.

According to Brother Superior’s address to the Lasallian World Confederation (December 1989):

The role of religious in the ministry of Christian education, religious such as the Brothers of the Christian Schools, has changed. It is now, as our Rule has clearly stated, . . . a role of collaboration.

The Institute’s Secretary for the Educative Mission, Brother José Maria Valladolid, goes even further: “The *together and by association* of the Brothers is extended to our collaborators.” However, Brother Hernando Sebá, in a recent edition of *Lasalliana*, seems to imply that our lay collaborators are invited to be inspired by the “spirit of association.” Still, today there is a tendency to reserve the expression *together and by association* to the Brothers who make such a vow, and the expression the *spirit of association* to our other lay collaborators.

That there is confusion is, I think, quite clear. Brother Genaro, Vicar General, addressing

---

A conference presented at the USA/Toronto Regional Convocation II, Moraga, CA, 11 August 1990.

the Lasallian World Confederation in December 1989, stated:

This *together and by association* needs to be explained and redefined. This expression originated in and for the Brothers' Institute. There it has a meaning and results in practices which do not necessarily correspond with what we have in mind when we use the expression in connection with the Lasallian Family.

What is clear is the *vocation* and *membership* have—in some contexts—taken on new meanings: *vocation*, including a *Lasallian vocation*, is no longer necessarily seen as linked to the *vowed* life, and *membership* does not necessitate professing the vows. The changing terminology is symbolic of a changing order.

**2. How have we reacted to recent developments**—where *association* has taken on a broader meaning in the context of a shared mission and a *Lasallian Family*?

At first sight we can see two opposing reactions: one which sees this broadening of association as a threat, and the other that sees it as an opportunity. For some Brothers it represents a threat to former, private symbols, to former structures—the unwelcome encroachment of strangers into a private domain. For others, this broadening of association is an opportunity to be creative and to bring added strength and a needed support system to our mission—a means of providing wider resources.

The first position might represent what we could call a hierarchical and separatist approach, with the emphasis upon how our status is different from that of other lay collaborators. The second reaction represents an emphasis placed upon the mission—where communities, made up of Brothers and other laypeople, are equal partners in the mission.

However, between these two opposing positions there is perhaps a third, more common, reaction which views the present developments from the position of the institution, as a means

for that institution to guarantee its survival. It is very difficult to judge motivations for invoking the need to extend the Lasallian Family, but what is certain is that the present phenomena of shared mission, Lasallian Family, and association with our lay collaborators have come to the fore precisely as the number of Brothers has been decreasing. So we see, simultaneously, a decrease in the number of Brothers and a multiplication of ministries in the Church. There are those who see present developments as an attempt to breath a bit of new life into an otherwise dying body, while others are looking openly to the next stage of that body's existence.

### **3. Examples of association at present being practiced**

The tradition of other laypeople collaborating in our mission is nothing particularly new, and a glance at present statistics reveals that 33,000 other laymen and laywomen are associated with 8,400 Brothers, of whom perhaps only 50 per cent are still directly engaged in school or educational work.

Certain forms of other laypeople's association with the Institute's mission are universally known, if not practiced, throughout the Institute: *Signum Fidei*, former students' associations, and the Lasallian World Confederation. But even within these groups there is great variety among different geographical locations.

*The Union of Catechists of Jesus Crucified and Mary Immaculate* is a secular Institute that takes its inspiration from Lasallian spirituality. A Brother Assessor, appointed by Brother Superior, has an advisory role.

A recent development in France is the establishment of the *Lasallian Third Order*, with at present about half a dozen members. It is a rather interesting phenomenon within what is already a congregation of laymen.

The French Region has shown creativity by setting up the *Association La Salle*, which is the body (constituted of an equal number of Brothers and lay directors) that oversees the

administration and legal representation for all Lasallian institutions in the French Region. Other organs, such as the French Lasallian Center, have been set up to provide for the continuing formation of Brothers and laypeople together.

Probably the best known group of Sisters who are associated with our mission is the *Hermanas Guadalupanas de La Salle*, founded by a Brother in Mexico. There are now Lasallian Sisters established in one or another form in the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam. Brothers in several other countries, Spain, for example, are in communication with other groups of women who are seeking a more structured form of linking with the Brothers' Institute.

In some regions, Sisters belonging to other congregations are very closely involved in our mission and even share community life with our Brothers. This would be the case in certain retreat center communities in the United States and in Ireland and in another mixed community in South Africa.

There are Districts where lay volunteers, both men and women, live and work alongside the Brothers for a period of a year or so. Many Districts have short-term missionary projects where Brothers and other laypeople practice a very concrete form of interdependence, giving, and receiving.

In some countries (Monterey, Mexico is an example) the majority of the catechetical work in our schools is organized and carried out by the students' parents, working in association with one or two Brothers who supervise and encourage. Each of you here would be able to complete this picture with examples you are aware of.

Not only is it important to note the variety that exists in terms of association across the Institute, it is equally important to recognize that what motivates association may be quite different from place to place. To take one simple material example, teaching in a Lasallian school represents a considerable economic sacrifice for teachers in certain parts of the world, whereas in other countries our Lasallian teach-

ers are much better paid than in the state schools. Waving the Lasallian flag might imply quite different levels of commitment.

The association of other laypeople with the Lasallian mission is already a clearly established fact. Where there is much less clarity is in some of the thinking around and justification of this fact. But that already brings me to my next point.

#### **4. Certain apparent inconsistencies in present thinking and language regarding association**

I suggest we have to avoid two main dangers at present: one is to be so enthusiastic to involve all comers in our mission that we apply terms and words in an equal way to all groups. Secondly, there is the danger of using an apparently open, generous language when speaking of shared mission, while in reality retaining almost exclusive power and influence over that mission by reserving the role of "motor" and "guarantor of fidelity" exclusively for the Brothers.

I think the first danger is well illustrated in a talk Brother Vicar gave to the Cilists this year in which he took the title, "The Ministry of the Brother," followed by an asterisk indicating a footnote in which he stated, "In reality we would have to speak of the ministry of the Lasallian person, Brother, layman, and so on." The implication that the Brother's ministry is identical to the ministry of any other Lasallian layperson is liable to lead to unhelpful confusion. There may be many distinct ministries within our own mission.

I see a danger reflected in the address to the Cilists made by the Brother Secretary for the Educative Mission, where we read that "together and by association" has two levels: the Brothers who commit their lives in an exclusive way for the success of the schools and who make up the Institute, and then our lay collaborators who work with great dedication but outside the Society, because they have been called to live a family lifestyle. We are told that they have different roles, although these are not

defined. But then comes the assertion that only the Brothers are the “motor” and the “guarantors of fidelity” to the mission of the Institute (that is, the exclusive FSC group just defined), even though we are told it is a shared mission of partners. I find it difficult to support the claim that we are equal partners in a shared mission if effectively one of the partners retains exclusive direction and control.

A question is raised here as to what model of Institute and what model of mission are being used. Whose mission are we speaking of? Are we identifying mission (which is of the Church) and ministry (which can be many and varied within the same mission)? There is a tendency to define mission from our position—and we may be doing the same thing with association. Where is our starting point for association? From within, from the Institute’s position, or from without, from the mission’s position?

We are facing here a question of identity. And I do not think that we can grip tightly to a fixed idea of the FSC identity, while at the same time we wish to ride along with the development of a broader “association.” The adventurous and creative ride on the back of association might have to be at the expense of looking again at our identity. Where are the roots of our identity at present? In a canonical status—with our vows—or in our response to mission? The answer is obviously not a simple either/or, but our answer will indicate a particular emphasis. And for all the talk of “shared mission” and “association,” there is still a danger that we effectively hold on to a hierarchical view of our identity, based not upon role or service, but upon status. And that will not help us to be open or creative for the future.

This tendency to seek status and a ready-made category is perceptible, too, in certain reactions to the groups of women who wish to form community and be associated with the Lasallian mission. The danger is to assume them automatically under an umbrella formula, for example, the Guadalupanas Sisters, who came to birth at another time and in different

circumstances. Let’s hope we can respectfully leave the women themselves to decide what lifestyle and status are best suited to their particular needs and interests. We need to be creative and look at other possible alternatives for each particular group of women that may present itself.

It is worth remembering that our identity as Brothers of the Christian Schools is historically rooted in an unorthodox setting—where two specific vows, and not the three classic vows of religious life, expressed our specific charism. Our vow formula appeared in our historical process as a result of a vital association within a specified group of individuals.

We are in evolution, in process. Vatican II insists greatly on this notion of process and development and on the respect we must therefore have for local, specific realities, for local developments, for inculturation.

We are not, as Districts, all at the same stage of development. We cannot generalize about association for the whole Institute. We are at different stages of development. We have to be as sensitive, adaptable, and creative as was our Founder at the origin of the Institute.

Rather than wishing to be the “motor” (an analogy that perpetuates the idea that only the FSCs constitute the real energy for the mission), perhaps we could hope to be the learner within a much larger mass, happy to see some rather odd shapes and forms develop.

For De La Salle and the early Brothers, association was a strategy in view of mission: a means of assuring energy and efficiency for that mission. We must be careful not to make an ideology out of association.

## **5. A few questions as we look toward the future**

Brother Hernando Sebá said to the 1990 Cilists:

The circular model of Lasallian Family is the only valid model now. We are all equal within that family. When it comes to discussing private FSC business, laypeople

have no right to be involved. But when we speak of mission they should be involved.

The most recent issue of *Lasalliana* states:

A District or regional plan cannot be drawn up by Brothers only. The various Lasallian groups must make their specific contribution to it. Seen in this light, The District Plan becomes the District Lasallian Family Plan.

**My question is this:** are we ready to accept the consequences of this broadening of “association?” In addition to letting other laypeople share the responsibilities for administration and finance, are we ready to share with them the advantages and benefits that come with it?

Certain commentaries on “association” would give the impression that we are ready to accept fuller partnership with other laypeople in the realm of the apostolate—the work—but that the Brothers’ community is a private affair for us alone. Are we ready to accept possible demands made upon us and our lifestyle by other members of the Lasallian Family?

The original motivation for “association” in our Institute was the desire to have a life structure that would facilitate discipleship—it was a strategy for efficiency in mission. Today, in fidelity to that original motivation for Lasallian association, would we want to make any changes to our structures, to our lifestyle?

Are we ready to allow our spirituality to develop and grow in line with a greater openness to “Lasallians” who are part of a secular culture? Or does “our” spirituality develop as if these other Lasallians didn’t really exist?

Does the *rapprochement* between the consecrated life and lay secular life offer possibilities for new forms of living the Gospel values in the service of mission?

Does this new understanding of association offer an opportunity for incarnating our charism in a new way: new forms of religious life, new styles of grouping together for mission?

In my present apostolate and mission, whom do I feel myself “associated with” in reality?

Where do I see scope for developing the bonds of association in my local setting?

What is my gut reaction when I hear of association, shared mission, and Lasallian Family? Do I understand my reaction?

Is there any link between my reaction and my usual dealings with other lay collaborators?

Are we prepared to take the means to offer the necessary formation—time, finance, personnel—to those other laypeople whom we invite to be associated with us?

Perhaps many of us are still not trusting enough in the other actors involved in our mission: fellow educators, parents, young people, political groups, and so forth. We may still be spending paralyzing time and effort discussing who are the poor, or perhaps we prefer to sacralize the past, the texts, or the Founder. Our language frequently reflects the language of maintenance: “our patrimony,” “our heritage,” “handing on our works.”

Let’s listen to what is happening now: where you live. Where does life seem to spring from in your local apostolate? Where is the “motor,” in fact? Which “associated” people are contributing the energy to, and ensuring the life of, your institutions? Which individuals with whom you work bring energy and encouragement to you? Are they Brothers, Sisters, or other laymen and laywomen?

Let’s see where life is springing from and then construct:

- forms of association for mission
- in community around these realities.

We might have to do what the Founder did: ignore and leave aside past, inefficient modes, so as to build new structures for mission. This is what I understand association to be: an efficient, life-giving cooperation for mission. It is central to the whole idea of lay ministry.

A final word: some of us may see the broadening of association as a threat, because effectively it is so for the stage which the Institute has reached in our country, or because of

the sense of identity that we at present hold to. For others, association is an opportunity—to invent, to create, to prepare for a new stage in what we call religious life.

It is going to be challenging, pioneer territory, but it's out there, armed with our spirit of faith and zeal, that we will come to a deeper understanding of what association might become—as yet a “gift half-understood.”

### **A few questions for group discussion as we look toward the future**

1. Are we ready to accept the consequences of this broadening of association? In addition to letting other laypeople share the responsibilities for administration and finance, are we ready to share with them the advantages and benefits?

2. Are we prepared to take the means (time, finances, and so on) to offer the necessary formation to those other laypeople whom we invite to be associated with us?

3. Certain commentaries on association would give the impression that we are ready to accept full partnership with other laypeople in the realm of the apostolate—work, but that the Brothers' community is a private affair, for us alone. Are we ready to accept possible demands made upon us and our lifestyle by other members of the Lasallian Family?

4. The original motivation for association in our Institute was the desire to have a life structure that would facilitate discipleship—it was a strategy for efficiency in mission. Today, in fidelity to that original motivation for Lasallian association, would we want to make any changes to our structures, to our lifestyle?

5. Are we ready to allow our spirituality to develop and grow in line with a greater openness to Lasallians who are part of a secular culture?

6. Does the *rapprochement* between the consecrated life and lay secular life offer possibilities

for new forms of living the Gospel values in the service of mission?

7. Does this new understanding of association offer an opportunity for incarnating our charism in a new way?

8. In my present apostolate and mission, with whom do I feel myself associated in reality?

9. Where do I see scope for developing the bonds of association in my local setting?

10. What is my gut reaction when I hear of association, shared mission, and Lasallian Family? Do I understand my reaction?

11. Is there any link between my reaction and my usual dealings with other lay collaborators?