

# Association: The College Perspective

Carole Swain

My association with the De La Salle Christian Brothers began with my appointment at Saint Mary's College in 1988. A decade later, I was so immersed in and enthusiastic about Lasallian mission work that I began signing letters "In Association". At some point I realized that I might have been presumptuous. Association, for the Brothers, is more than the passion I felt about belonging to something bigger and more powerful than myself. The Brothers' Association is a sacred vow, made for life, that "together and by association, Brothers will provide a human and Christian education for the young, especially for the poor."

Many Saint Mary's College colleagues proudly call themselves Lasallians because they accept the Brothers' invitation to share their mission (41st General Chapter). Acknowledging our common heritage and the inspiration of the Lasallian charism results in action. Action leads to feelings of belonging and association.

How do we experience association at the college level? What opportunities and challenges does association imply?

## **Opportunities for Association**

A Lasallian college or university is part of the larger Lasallian family, which includes the District, the Region, and the international Institute. This expanded affiliation gives students, faculty, and staff opportunities to participate in formation retreats, in the Buttimer and Lasallian Leadership Institutes, and in reading and

discussion groups. They might tutor, serve as Lasallian Volunteers, or immerse themselves in Lasallian projects in India, Sri Lanka, Africa, the Philippines, Brazil, or Mexico.

Saint Mary's College of California is an intentionally diverse Catholic, Lasallian, Liberal Arts, Learning Community. The College welcomes and supports students from a variety of backgrounds. Having a significant number of Lasallian high school graduates attend the College is especially important for Lasallian association. These students are "leaven" for the community, for they have learned to expect fraternal love, community service opportunities, high academic expectations, and prayer as essential components of a Lasallian institution.

Another opportunity for building community and association is the required Collegiate Seminar that invites students into a *Great Conversation* with Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Saint Augustine, Dante, Saint Thomas Aquinas, Hildegard von Bingen, Christina de Pizan, and others. The Collegiate Seminar nurtures a strong sense of belonging (that is, of association) in small classes with caring teachers and opportunities for students, faculty, and staff to participate in co-curricular activities of theater and music productions, lectures, community service, travel courses, art shows, meals, and worship.

Saint Mary's College, I can say, is a loosely affiliated community with individuals who experience varying "degrees of belonging" to the Institute (an expression of the 40th General

Chapter). The number of individuals open to shared mission activity and motivated to seek opportunities to live the Lasallian mission is one factor in determining the strength of association.

### **Challenges to Association— Structural, Cultural, and Personal**

Because classroom space is at a premium, classes meet day and night. At no time does the whole college community gather. A modification of the class schedule creates two common occasions a year, in theory, when the community can participate: the Mass of the Holy Spirit and the Spring Convocation. Given that the college culture in the USA is one of freedom and choice, a full gathering of the entire college as a community never happens.

Because Catholic colleges and universities depend on tuition income, making them accessible to poor students is a complex challenge. Creative use of federal and state grants, scholarships, and loans, as well as of local endowments and scholarship funds, enables two-thirds of our students to experience a Saint Mary's education who would not otherwise be able to afford it.

Structural challenges in schools, departments, and programs militate against a college-wide community. Many communities exist within the one Saint Mary's College: value-based, subject-centered, Gospel-driven, governance-derived, and service-oriented, to name a few. Recent commitments to support multi- and cross-disciplinary courses, learning communities, mission-aligned student learning outcomes, and cross-functional teams are hopeful signs of community building.

Personal challenges also can confront students and colleagues while serving the Lasallian mission. Possibilities include violence, disease, discomfort, and family sacrifices—personal challenges that we must meet through faith.

In light of all the challenges and opportunities about association that the college and university domain presents, can faculty and

staff claim to be “in association” with the De La Salle Christian Brothers? Can we possibly unite with them and one another for a common purpose? Can we work together as brothers and sisters, giving one another mutual support and spiritual friendship while relating as sisters and brothers to our students? Is our communal faith sufficiently strong to evoke enough zeal to continue serving poor students in higher education?

Some members of the college community might respond favorably to these questions; others might find these concepts foreign. We are “in varying degrees of belonging and association,” some of us more closely linked than others with the mission of the Institute.

### **Concluding Reflection**

My first visits to Saint Mary's College were two life-changing events.

One night, thirty years ago, I was a graduate student visiting Saint Mary's College of California to hear Bruno Bettleheim speak about the integrating force of fairy tales. In many ways my journey with the De La Salle Christian Brothers has been like a series of fairy-tale adventures into unknown, dark forests—in the Philippines, Africa, El Paso, Juarez, and San Francisco's Tenderloin District. Each experience renewed, refreshed, and recommitted me to service of the poor through quality education for all.

My second trip to Saint Mary's was on a bright, sunny day—the Sunday before my job interview. Nestled in the hills near Moraga appeared this beautiful, mission-styled campus with music streaming from the chapel. I strolled over to listen just as a bishop was leading the procession of newly confirmed Catholics out of the chapel and into the sunshine. His sparkling, welcoming eyes claimed me. Unknown to me at the time, this bishop is an Affiliated Christian Brother, retired, associated with the College, and with an office two doors away from mine.

I “came home” to a place where it is difficult to distinguish between my professional and

my spiritual life. Catholic social teaching—the dignity of the individual, the joys of ambiguity, and a sacramental view of the universe—free me daily to live with renewed hope and zeal. I am committed to living the charism of a transformative, educational spirit that brings wholeness to the teacher, the student, and the community, but only together and in association with Brothers and my Lasallian partners.



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