

ASSOCIATION AND COMMUNION

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Preliminary:

The present article is a consideration without pretension, and without specific theological, historical or Lasallian competence on my part. Let me simply offer a filial interpretation of JBS, derived from a few questions that have been with me for a long time. I am attempting a little personal synthesis.

The questions, in no particular order, are the following:

- Why consecration to the Trinity alone?
- The “vow” of Association? What does it involve?
- “Together and by Association”?
- Why are the Brothers invited to “gladly associate lay persons with them in their mission”?
- Association: what does it involve for lay people? What path(s) to follow?

I. “MOST HOLY TRINITY...”

It is an old question: was it the date, that is to say the last day of the annual retreat of the Brothers, which inspired this address, or rather did not John Baptist de La Salle “choose the solemn feast by a movement of exceptional devotion?” (1) Brother Maurice Auguste does not settle the point. (2) For our part, even if the step taken by John Baptist de La Salle, Nicolas Vuyart and Gabriel Drolin was individual and exceptional, we advance to the “heroic vow” of 1691, on the date of 21st November 1691, feast of the Presentation of Mary, where the formula begins with “most holy Trinity” (3). The moment appears sufficiently solemn for the inspiration to go beyond the chance element, even if this formula had been in use for some years already.

Without entering here into a detailed description of the Spirituality of the French School, the choice of addressing the consecration to the Trinity seems to me to bring outstanding depth to the content of the vows “of association and of union”.

In the Meditation for the feast of the Holy Trinity De La Salle makes the exhortation: “If it is true that this mystery, which has no equal in dignity and in holiness, is the first object of the veneration of all the faithful, it should be all the more important for you, since you are obliged to teach it and to make it known to all *the children who are the living plants in the field of the Church*. They, too, were consecrated to the Most Holy Trinity in baptism, just as you were; they bear in their souls the indelible character of their belonging to God; they are indebted to this adorable mystery for the anointing with grace that has been poured into their hearts. It is only right that you who are responsible for explaining this mystery to them as far as faith allows, should recognise it as the source of all enlightenment, the foundation of faith, and the basis of our religion.”(4)

We can see de La Salle putting children and Brothers on the same footing – sharing the same baptism, they are consecrated to the Trinity. John Baptist de La Salle considers young people and Brothers as members of the same Church, precisely because of their integration with the Trinity. They share in the same mystery of communion which is that of the divine persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Thus penetrated with faith in the importance of this reality, the Brothers by their zeal have as mission to cause the children to share in this mystery of communion.

“With this in view you should today pay very special honour, and dedicate yourself entirely, to the Most Holy Trinity, to contribute as far as you will be able to extend its glory over all the earth. For this purpose enter into the spirit of your Institute and stir up in yourself the zeal that God wishes you to have in its fullness, so that you can give your pupils some understanding of this mystery.” (5) Let us try to develop this further.

• Vatican Council II draws upon the prayer of Jesus “may they be one as we also are one” to state that there is “a certain resemblance between the union of the divine persons and that of the children of God” (G.S. N° 24). “For the closer their union with the Father, the Word, and the Spirit, the more deeply and easily will they be able to grow in mutual brotherly love” (U.R. N° 7). Communion with God is the source, the model and the aim of universal fraternity. The relations between Father, Son and Spirit are mutual. Each one is at the same time giving and receiving; each does not accept giving without receiving. No one person is self-sufficient, none wishes to proudly dominate the others nor escape into solitude. Each finds joy and fullness in the two others in unceasing movement, without loss of identity. A model in one sense, while inimitable as the communione image of God, yet how enlightening and stimulating for us. God is Trinitarian and therefore relational by definition. (6)

“To become as God is” (Lk 6,36), to be “*participant in the divine nature*” (2 P 1,4), is to welcome and to adopt the way of being of God, that is to say to enter into the dynamic of communion which is his very being. Because it is the vocation of women and men to be in the image of this infinite love which links the three divine persons in the Trinity, the human community does not realize itself fully, until it builds and fulfils itself as a *koinonia* of love. “God has willed that all people constitute a single family, and relate to one another mutually as brothers and sisters” (GS, N° 24, §1). (7)

The Trinity was then the mystery at the center of the whole inspiration and thrust of the new Institute. It would well seem that this reference is the final step in an unequalled experience of the Triune God, not only in a theological but also in an anthropological movement. An undertaking such as that of creating a Society for animating schools in order to reach youth and announce Jesus Christ to them, could do so, in its nature and in its constitution, only by reference to the life of the Trinity

II. «ASSOCIATION AND UNION»

Without going into the historical circumstances of the pronouncing of the Vow of 1791, called the “heroic vow”, we can affirm that this vow, long kept secret,(8) taking place in a dramatic situation at the human level, reveals an intense moment of spiritual initiative, on the part of John Baptist de La Salle certainly, and on the part of his two confrères. The formula such as transcribed in Blain is as follows:

*“Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, prostrate with the most profound respect before your infinite and adorable majesty, we consecrate ourselves entirely to you...And, for that purpose, I, John Baptist de La Salle, priest, I, Nicolas Vuyart, and I, Gabriel Drolin, from now on and forever until the last surviving one of us, or until the complete establishment of the said Society, make the vow **of association and union** to bring about and maintain the said establishment, without being able to withdraw from this obligation, even if only we three remained in the said Society, and if we were obliged to beg for alms and to live on bread alone.*

*In view of which we promise **to do, all together and by common accord**, everything we shall think in conscience, and regardless of any human consideration, to be for the greater good of the said Society.*

Done on this 21st of November, feast of the Presentation of Our Lady, 1691. In testimony of which we have signed...“

We notice an expression of the vow which is unique by comparison with all the previous formulas but which will henceforth be a guide for later formulas. (9)

“vow of association and union”

We have here the birth of a conviction that the new community could only survive by a solemn undertaking by its members, to remain united despite whatever trials and tribulations the future might hold.

What is amazing, despite possibly a chance element, is that in all the written works of John Baptist de La Salle, there is only one use of this expression “association and union”, and that is in connection with marriage and the sacrament thereof:

*“Jesus Christ having established a law of grace, has willed that all within that law be performed with grace. For this reason, knowing that one of the most corrupted of actions was marriage, because most people enter into it with intentions far removed from those that God had in instituting it, he wished to oblige Christians to undertake it with only the holiest and purest of intentions. This he did by raising **this association and this union of man and woman to the dignity of a sacrament**. This was also to offer the means to husband and wife to carry out the duties of this state with grace, *to bear the weight of troubles easily and to preserve towards one another a very great fidelity.*” (10)*

Without forcing texts to say more than they do, it must be agreed that de La Salle never made a connection between these two engagements. All the same, if we look at it from the point of view of the spiritual life, God raised marriage to the rank of a sacrament and accords to man and woman all the graces needed to live it daily.

Further on in the Duties of a Christian De La Salle explains:

“The sacramental grace of marriage is that which God gives to married people to live chastely and holily in this state, to be strongly united, to support the troubles of marriage, and to carry out the duties it imposes. *And this grace is linked to the three obligations of married persons which are: to remain together forever without being free to separate, to remain faithful to one another, and to nourish and bring up their children as Christians.*” (11)

Would it be baseless to advance that the vow of association and of union, as pronounced by the three, possesses this content, namely a union in remaining “together forever” and an unflinching fidelity, in the image of Christ and his Church and in the image of the Trinity itself. If God by his grace accords to some all the graces needed to accompany them in their difficulties, he will act likewise with others.

And when La Salle speaks of community, he exhorts the Brothers as follows:

“Since God has given you the grace of calling you to live in community, there is nothing that you should more earnestly ask of him than *this union of mind and heart* with your Brothers. Only *by means of this union* will you acquire that peace which ought to be the whole joy of your life. Entreat the God of hearts to keep your heart and those of your Brothers one in the heart of Jesus.”(12)

All this demonstrates to what point John Baptist de La Salle considered these two realities as necessary to his young Institute. At the same time it is clear that the insistence he places on not confusing “association” and “union” is a point that he considers so important as to say each separately. Moreover in the formula of vows, the second term is expressed in more developed form further on.

III. CHURCH AND SOCIETY

As from the formula of 1691, John Baptist de La Salle and his two “associates” bind themselves to give themselves totally, and without going back, to “the establishment of the Society of the Christian Schools.”

It would seem that many undertakings, reflections, and exhortations were centered on this theme of “society”. If we refer to a meaning which was current in the 17th Century, that used probably by De La Salle, we note:

“State peculiar to certain beings, who live as a more or less numerous and organized group. ”Society is the union of men, and not men themselves" (Montesquieu) (13)

“Organized and permanent group, instituted for a precise aim (Religious company or association) –Congregation –The Society of Jesus” (14).

This term will appear constantly in the formula of vows as also in the Rule. Afterwards it will be paralleled by the term “Institute”, both meaning the same thing.

We observe that in the concept of “Society”, certain aspects are involved which appear fundamental: organization, union and permanence. Without doubt the notion of purpose intervenes and we will return to this later. We are far from the modern connotation of this term where it has taken on a more “material” aspect, even sometimes “commercial” or even “having a secret character”.

We could also include in this term a spiritual aspect such as John Baptist de La Salle himself developed :

“His apostles and disciples being all united and assembled in the same place, and having received the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, began to form a new society of faithful people, with three thousand persons whom Saint Peter converted that very day, and five thousand whom he converted a few days later. It is this society of the one same faith and of the same religion which *we call "Church", for this word means a family, a society or an assembly*“ (15)

This “society” willed by De La Salle was indeed in the image of the Church, all the more so as it was “instituted” or “established” in order to bring salvation to children. In addition, he defines this society which the Brothers are, as being willed by God and therefore being integrated within the mission of the Church. On this matter we have only to refer to the “Meditations for the Time of Retreat”.

Moreover just as the Church is animated by the Holy Spirit so too is this Society whose union is the life of the Spirit. (16)

IV. CHURCH AND COMMUNITY

The pattern of the Church and that of the Community are identical. Without affirming that every community is Church, John Baptist de La Salle emphasizes that the criteria of the Community are the same as those for the Church: those constituting the primitive community based on fraternity, prayer, the breaking of bread and the sharing of goods. We should note that the term “Community” covers in this precise case the whole of the emerging Institute rather than the communities referred to as “local”. We will come back over this point.

On this question we can take note of some quotations selected from among many others:

“This *community can be very useful to the Church*. Be persuaded however that it will not be so unless it is established on these two foundations, namely piety and humility, which will render it unshakeable.” (17)

“Often pray to St Michael to have the goodness *to protect this little family, this church of Jesus Christ* (18), according to the expression of Saint Paul, which is our community, that he give it the means of preserving within itself the Spirit of Jesus Christ, and to all its members the graces they need to persevere in their vocation, and to procure the spirit of Christianity for all those who are under their guidance.” (19)

“This was also what this saint required of all the members of his Company when he was their General. He even wished that all the houses of professed members who belonged to the Company should have no other foundation than poverty itself.

Is this the sort of foundation on which you desire your community to be built? It is a sure and unfailing foundation for those whose faith is true and who are interiorly animated by the spirit of Our Lord. You cannot do better than to base your fortune on this foundation; it is the one that Jesus Christ thought to be the most solid, and on which the holy apostles began to build the edifice of the Church.” (MF 176,2,2)

It can also be noted how far John Baptist de La Salle insists on the fact that the members of the Community are animated by the same spirit, the Holy Spirit. In addition this Community is not turned in on itself but has for aim to “procure the spirit of Christianity for all those under their care”.

De La Salle makes union the central point of the Community, union which brings peace, happiness and permanence, cherished as the precious gem of the Gospel...

“*Since God has given you the grace of calling you to live in community, there is nothing that you should more earnestly ask of him than this union of mind and heart with your Brothers. Only by means of this union will you acquire that peace which ought to be all the joy of your life. Entreat the God of hearts to keep your heart and those of your Brothers one in the heart of Jesus.*” (20)

“*Union in a community is a precious gem, which is why Our Lord so often recommended it to his apostles before he died. If we lose this, we lose everything. Preserve it with care, therefore, if you want your community to survive.*” (21)

It is in this way that the Community becomes the “lived” union...such as willed by the wording of the heroic vow of 1691. If we reread the development of this concept we see that John Baptist de La Salle initially conceived his new foundation as a “community” in the image of the new-born Church. Confronted with necessities, he realised that things had to more structured. Following the example of other founders of his time, and Vincent de Paul seems to have been one of his inspirers, (22) he inclined towards use of the term “Society”, following the conviction to act only by association. As the Institute gradually

expanded, the community became the local community, that is to say, the concrete expression of association, which de La Salle renders by “together”.

V. TOGETHER AND BY ASSOCIATION (ENSEMBLE ET PAR ASSOCIATION)

It seems that this expression is to be taken as a whole, that is to say that it sums up in itself the outstanding means to “keep schools gratuitously”.

If we refer to the meaning of the terms in the 17th Century, ensemble means “one with another”, and the term association relates directly to the term Society. (23)

In other words when John Baptist de La Salle emphasizes association, it is understood that there is question of constituting a Society, in law very certainly, but also inspired by a very strong spiritual dynamic such as we have attempted to explain above. When he uses the term “together”, it is certainly to express the concrete place, sharing, a same mission which presupposes a personal contribution directed towards the dynamic of the whole.

To sum up, it is certainly question of a Church procedure, that is to say of ensuring a balance and a complementarity between the private procedure or commitment, and the collective procedure or commitment. In addition there is question also of a task to be done, in view of a mission inscribed within the divine Plan of Salvation, that of bringing the Salvation of Jesus Christ to abandoned youth, and in order to do this to keep schools gratuitously.

VI. «THE BROTHERS GLADLY ASSOCIATE LAY PERSONS WITH THEM IN THEIR EDUCATIONAL MISSION» (24)

We have here a reality lived now for some decades and systematized by the Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools of 1987. The words that follow are important also: “They provide, for those who desire, the means to learn about the Founder and to live according to his spirit.” (25)

The 42nd General Chapter spent a long time studying this theme expressed as “Shared Mission”. The purpose of this short article is not to present an exhaustive study of how the Brothers are invited to collaborate with lay persons. In these few lines we have highlighted certain terms which are used to identify this reality: association, sharing, collaboration, partnership...but however...

If we place ourselves in the light of what we have attempted to set out above, it is surely proper to use the term “association” knowing that every significant term implies a specific activity.

I think that we, Brothers and lay persons, are agreed to concur about what our educational mission is. There remain the means to be determined... In a certain manner, what does the term “associate” cover when it is addressed to the lay-educators who “want their professional work to be a form of gospel ministry” (26).

If we go back to the Mémoire sur l’habit of De La Salle, a very clear distinction is drawn between the Brothers of the Society of the Brothers of the Christian Schools and the country schoolteachers. All the same, we can note the following indication of the Founder concerning essentials:

“Care is also given to the training of teachers for country districts, in a house separate from the community, and which is called a seminary.

Those who are trained there remain only a few years until they are fully prepared both with regard to piety and their employment”. (27)

We note the two terms piety and employment, and the Founder hastens to add, a few lines further on:

“and when they have secured a post, they have no further connection with the community except in so far as is polite and becoming. They are, however, welcomed back for the purpose of making retreats.” (28)

There can be no doubt about it, the Founder is in no way seeking to keep them at a distance, but he dictates a line according to which these teachers are not destined to live according to the same criteria as the community. All the same, the expression polite and becoming is not to be understood in a restrictive sense, to remain aloof. Quite the contrary, the relationships with the community are maintained “according to what is proper”, that is to say *according to piety and the employment* to which they have been trained, but not by invoking a similarity in life-style. In addition he insists strongly on the possibility of an annual retreat, and one has only to read the Meditations for the Time of Retreat, which are addressed equally to Brothers and teachers, to be convinced of this point.

Let us come now to what Brother Maurice Auguste qualifies as “omissions”: the almost absolute silence in the Common Rules and elsewhere about vows... and in particular that of obedience (29) up until 1725.

Brother Maurice Auguste justifies this fact on the basis that all the Brothers not having made vows, temporary or perpetual, the Founder did not wish to create differences between them, the essential being found elsewhere. The Brother is above all member of the “Society” and the fact of being admitted to same, in this case by having entered the Novitiate, committed him by this deed to live and to act within the Society, that is to say, to keep schools gratuitously, together and by association with all the other Brothers. Nevertheless, it was essential to the Society that the “principal” Brothers should have made the vows of association, stability and obedience, because this was a primordial

factor for the cohesion of the society. As things turned out, the Bull of Approbation of 1725 and the new Code of Canon Law of 1918 changed matters, but up till then the Brothers could, but not must, make vows.

In the present state of discussion, it is perhaps proper not to consider as being synonymous, certain terms which do not refer to the same process. This is the case with: Association with lay persons, Association of lay persons and even The 1901 Law of Association. (Translator's note: The last of these terms has relevance, and great relevance at that, for France only. Some of the material of the following paragraphs has reference to this).

If we refer to the thought of John Baptist de La Salle and to the position of the Institute, the mission of evangelizing youth, in particular by "the service of the poor through education" (30) can only be effected by a process of Association, as defined above. Association is in some way a communion lived between all those who feel themselves associated or who have made a particular move...It is thus with the Brother by the vow of Association. What then of lay persons? Is it enough to invite them to subscribe to the same Association under the Law of 1901, whose inspiration (or object) however laudable, will never attain the intuition of John Baptist de La Salle, namely an association which is a communion with the Church and the Trinity. Then too this Law-of-1901 type of association brings with it a complexity and an administrative legality which is necessary but in no way inspiring? Should we be aiming at a group of lay persons, organised certainly, but whose first concern, inherent in this choice, is to organise everything in terms of efficacy, to the detriment of a powerful spiritual inspiration, even if the leaders deny this?

It seems useful at this juncture to define the type of "Association movement" so as to clarify different situations. Is it enough to define this movement, all in all a personal matter to begin with, as a simple step, namely "to join in with an existing group more or less in direct and clear relation with the Brothers?" For example is it enough to be a teacher in an establishment historically connected with the Institute of the Brothers to be by this fact "an Associate"? Is it enough to be part of the administration of a Lasallian establishment to be by this fact "an Associate"? Is it enough to be a parent of a student for two or three years to be by this fact "an Associate"? and so on. If the "keep together" is fundamental in the movement of association, it remains no less important to link practice to founding inspiration and to a spiritual process. In some ways the "praxis", however necessary it may be, is not enough. It must be accompanied by this profound sense of communion, which at the same time inspires the educational movement and the proclamation of Jesus Christ.

To put it another way, a lived Association, broadly and organizationally speaking, can be set up in each establishment, that is to say all the component elements can be involved in the undertaking and the development of the educational endeavor. In fact this is what is happening more or less in each establishment.

Such activity can only be effective and permanent if certain members are in some ways determined to live personally and in community an Association which inspires communion in the service of youth, of adults, having in view the proclamation of Jesus Christ. Such Association is precisely that lived by and with the Institute of the Brothers, according to the founding charism.

It does not seem fruitful to enter into a development based on merging which ends up as reducing, or an expanding galaxy whose center of gravity is constantly in question. Associating is not annexing or regrouping. It is a specific movement which it would be appropriate to deepen at the theological level because it is a way towards a “ministry”, at the canonical level, because it engages a process of common decision-taking at the level of law because it very likely involves a specific responsibility.

At the limit it is still necessary to make the Association dependent on the practice of the “Tutelle”, (Translator’s note: this refers to current practice in France. “Tutelle” means in this case organized supervision.) as seems to be the present tendency, or should we take a broader view in which the supervision of the school establishments would be just one element among others? Neither what is being said or what is being done about the question is very clear at present.

In some ways we have arrived at a point where we must decide with the lay persons themselves upon a way of Association. Brothers make vows of association for the educational service of the poor. How can lay persons associate themselves (rather than: be associated) with the Institute of the Brothers in order to respond to the common call to “associate themselves together and by association for the educational service of the poor and the evangelization of youth” and to thus share the same inspiration and the same dynamic?

CONCLUSION

It’s no small undertaking. It’s a question of rewriting a founding inspiration in a new context of society and of the Church. It’s a matter of: Brothers and lay persons living a “together and by association”, in a communion where the identity of each person is respected, where the spirit of faith inspires every action, where the process is that of the Trinity, where the zeal is that of the Church.

“The spiritual gifts which the Church has received in St John Baptist de La Salle go far beyond the confines of the Institute which he founded.

The Institute sees the existence of the various Lasallian movements as a grace from God renewing its own vitality. The Institute can associate with itself lay people who want to lead the life of perfection that the Gospel demands, by living according to the spirit of the Institute and by participating in its mission.

The Institute helps them achieve their proper autonomy. At the same time it creates appropriate ties with them and evaluates the authenticity of their Lasallian character.”

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NOTES

(1) F Maurice Auguste: CL 2 p 58.

(2) F Maurice Auguste: CL 2 p 79 ss.

(3) Blain I p 313.

(4) Med 46.

(5) Id.

(6) Église et Communion J.RIGAL p 337.

(7) Id.

(8) Fr Maurice Auguste, CL n° 2, p 39-40.

(13) Petit ROBERT art Société.

(14) id.

(15) Jean-Baptiste de La Salle DA Église105,1,2.

(16) id., DB 113,1.

(17) Jean Baptiste de La Salle MF 176, 2.

(18) Rm 16,5 et MF 169.3.

(19) Lasalliana, fiches 49-16-D-115 a 120.

(20) de La Salle MF 176,2.

(21) id., MF 91,2.

(22) F. Maurice Auguste- CL n°2,p 104.

(23) Le Petit ROBERT.

(24) Règle des F.E.C. Art 17.

(25) Id.

(26) Id., Art 17.

(27) JB de La Salle. M.H. 0,0,4.

(28) JB de La Salle. M.H. 0,0,6.

(29) Maurice Auguste C.L. n°2 p 104.

(30) Règle des Frères des Écoles Chrétiennes Art 25 (formule des vœux).

(31) Règle des Frères des Écoles chrétiennes art 146.