

# **FUTURE PROSPECTS FOR CREATING ASSOCIATION**

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Up till now, we have considered how association worked in the past and how it is working today. The task I have been given is to look at the future. Now that we know the origins of our association and what the present situation is, it remains for us to think about how we can build up association in the future.

First of all, two remarks to explain the spirit and limitations of what I have to say. The first is, that my point of view is that of a lay person. I feel this is a factor that needs to be stressed in this introduction. The second is, that I don't think John Baptist de La Salle thought out or planned association. He was a pragmatic person. He chose, evaluated and organised what he did in response to the situations he encountered. As he did so, he was always open to God's inspiration, and allowed himself to be led by him.

Just like De La Salle, we are "passengers on a boat without sails or oars". I don't know what obstacles lie on the road to association. I don't know any route that will be safe. I have no guide, no formula, no model to follow. I place my trust in my compass. It points towards the star, which lights up my way.

I shall restrict myself to considering a few basic points. There are four of them:

- difficulties we can expect
- factors conducive to association
- avenues to explore
- guidelines for formation.

## **1. DIFFICULTIES INVOLVED IN ASSOCIATION**

### **Difficulties connected with language**

It is obvious that the way we envisage association is very much influenced by the culture we come from, our past lives and our education. I find it, therefore, somewhat risky to try to work out a general definition which would be valid for everyone. Even if I managed to do so, everyone would adapt it to their own situation in a different way. What is most enriching and fruitful for the future is

not a single definition, but precisely all these different ways.

However, I note a tendency in everyday language to speak of association in a different and more restrictive manner than is usually the case in the Congregation.

**On the one hand, there is a tendency to replace the expressions “to associate with” and “to associate for” by the expression “to be associated with”.** The verb “to associate” implies a positive, individual and intentional process. “With” indicates that the process is undertaken with others. “To associate with” implies a relationship of partnership with others. “For” refers to the motivation of the individual and indicates the purpose of association. In this way, “for” gives meaning to the commitment of the individual and to the activity of the group.

Also, it is because I recognise my own personal project reflected in that of the group, that I “associate” so as to accomplish it with others. “Associating for” creates solidarity and co-responsibility among people for the object of association.

“To be associated with” presupposes the opposite process. It is “association” which is now paramount. It is “association” which invites the individual “to participate” in the achievement of its goals.

In its most advanced form, the individual “is associated with”. It may still be a personal and intentional process, but it has become passive.

If we are not careful, association runs the risk of paralysis and sclerosis, because the individual joins something already existing and functioning in a self-sufficient manner.

“Being associated with” brings with it the risk of a relationship of collaboration and even subordination among associates.

On the other hand, because of the way people think nowadays, association is often created, promoted and administered in the form of a contract. This con-

tract binds people to one another and to an “institution”. Association is based on the will and genuine desire of people to accomplish things together, or to participate in something already existing.

Personal commitment to association is not something more or less irrevocable, permanent and radical. For example, individuals can always resign according to certain rules, and the association can be dissolved.

If association is seen only in these terms, I think we need to speak of a kind of “spirit of association”, rather than of “association” in the Lasallian sense of the term.

### **Difficulties of a sociological nature**

This kind of difficulty arises from the adaptation of the historical model of Lasallian association to our present day situation.

### **Motivation, the level of commitment, the state of life of individuals**

Originally, Lasallian association was between individuals inspired by the same spirit of faith. Initially, these individuals committed themselves by vows which took an original form, that is, by vows of association, stability and obedience. At a later stage, they conformed to the Code of Canon Law and took the vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience. Consequently, one of the characteristics of the community, which was also the school staff, was its homogeneity. It was homogeneous because all its members had an identical motivation, commitment and state of life.

Nowadays, school staffs are heterogeneous. They are heterogeneous because of the members that compose them. They are formed of both non-Christians and Christians. Non-Christians are sometimes in the majority. We find the following statistics for Catholic schools in French-speaking Belgium: 5% practising Christians; just over 10% believers; and just under 80% non-Christians.

The latter did not necessarily choose to teach in Catholic schools, and even less so, in Lasallian schools. They ended up there because there was a job available, or because of some legislation.

Among the Christians, some practise their faith in “a private manner”, as it were, outside the school context. Others make it an integral dimension of their professional work. Some are Brothers. Most are lay persons. Many are married. They have children of various ages. Their first duty is to their family. There are many schools where there haven’t been any Brothers for years, and the pupils they taught are now approaching retirement age.

It is obvious that the differences of motivation, degrees of commitment and states of life of school staff members determines the degree of their involvement in the work of the school.

### **The degree of involvement in the mission**

As a consequence of the homogeneity of communities already mentioned, John Baptist de La Salle and the Brothers after him, put themselves both individually and as communities at the service of the educational mission. This meant that they all subscribed fully to its overall aims (to run together gratuitous schools for the poor, so that they became “a means of salvation”). They all subscribed to its pastoral and catechetical aims (to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ). They all subscribed also to its educational and pedagogical aims (the promotion of children and young people). This being so, their life of faith, their mission and the professional were completely integrated, and their teaching became a Church ministry.

Because of the heterogeneous character of school staffs today, their awareness of being part of the Lasallian educational mission, and their willingness to participate in it varies greatly. The educational mission is presented in the form of an educational and pedagogical mission statement based on the values the school wishes to promote.

- some persons accept the mission statement fully;
- others go along with it;
- others adopt an attitude of benevolent neutrality towards it, or are indifferent, or are simply unaware of its existence;
- in certain cases, there may be individuals who show their disapproval of it, or are openly hostile.

I think that this explains the different degrees of involvement and participation in the Lasallian mission. This may also throw some light on the dichotomy that may exist between a faith practised more or less intensely and the exercise of the profession, and especially on the difficulty of making teaching a form of evangelisation.

### **The practice and the reality of “educational” communities**

In order to accomplish the Lasallian mission, the Brothers formed stable communities (= the Brothers worked “together”) as part of a larger body, the Institute (= the Brothers worked “by association”); They were sustained in this by a strong sense of belonging.

In the context of the shared mission, I note two things:

On the one hand, the sharing of the mission by its nature transcends statuses, and so Brothers and lay persons, lay persons and lay persons, headmasters and teachers, management and collaborators, are all called to share a common responsibility. In practice, however, it is not rare to find co-responsibility more on the reflection and implementation level than on that of decision-making. It is not rare either to find a relationship of subordination that is maintained by a more or less paternalistic approach, more or less consciously, by Brothers or lay persons. This makes it difficult to work “together”.

On the other hand, instead of sharing convictions and plans, some persons form “task forces” for a few hours. The result is that it becomes difficult to develop a sense of belonging to a local educational “community”, and even more so, to a body which extends beyond the walls of the school. If people work together “locally”, it is difficult to work in association.

## **2. REASONS FOR ASSOCIATION**

**The question now arises: what is the reason for association?** In other words, is Lasallian association relevant today? Does it make any sense? In this connection, there are two points I think are important.

## **Fidelity to the founding inspiration**

John Baptist de La Salle allowed himself to be challenged by the “human and spiritual distress of the children of the artisans and the poor”. To respond to this need, “he brought (these) teachers together in a community, and subsequently founded with them the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools” (Rule 1).

This process of association did not come about immediately. It should be noted, however, that from about 1680, the need for standardising practices led him, one commitment leading to another”,

- to unite the Brothers around a common mission and a shared project,
- to make them completely responsible for it,
- to help them integrate their spirituality with their daily lives.

Community and association gradually established themselves as an original and relevant response to perceived educational needs.

Nowadays, the situations of “human and spiritual distress” involving children and adults around and near us, are identical. There is economic poverty, of course, but there is also spiritual, social, cultural, moral, affective and intellectual poverty. In our society, for example, this poverty takes the form of addiction, violence, violation of the rights of children.

How can we not allow ourselves to be challenged by these hundreds of thousands young people who spoke of their hunger and thirst for spirituality in Paris and Rome to an old man who is the voice and the response of the Church, our own voice and our own response?

In the face of these challenges, I think that the response set in motion by De La Salle remains relevant. Following his example, each of us is invited

- to take part in this fight
- join others to share projects, resources, strategies and practices with them
- adopt forms of action and bring them to a successful conclusion,
- give them meaning by finding support for them in our faith, in a community of faith, in what the 43<sup>rd</sup> General Chapter called “intentional groups”, in other communities of faith, in other intentional groups.

## **Fidelity to a call, to something specific**

My work as an adviser for school programmes brought me into contact with various school staffs and enabled me to listen to their views. I was struck by the need felt by individuals and by the school to (re)discover a specific status in the face of a steadily encroaching homogeneity and globalisation. There was a real fear of becoming diluted and dissolved in a monochrome Catholic education system, or even in a single and colourless educational system.

I am convinced that what makes Christian education so rich is the mosaic of specific elements inherited from the charism of Founders. We still have to rediscover, dust-off and put into effect all these charisms. If we do not do so, I think the fear I have will prove to be well founded.

During the La Salle Association colloquium in France in November 1998, Prof. G. Avanzini stated in this connection that it seemed to him that “too often people spoke of the founding charism, but failed to define it precisely, or to identify what characterised it.” He added: “This is an area in which much still remains to be done: there is certainly a need to redefine the characteristics of this charism, to present them schematically, make them explicit and define them in relation with the others. We need to compare the charisms of different teaching congregations.

I am convinced that it is the strength of association that will make it possible for us to undertake the work mentioned by Prof. Avanzini. This same strength can make us return to the founding inspiration and to commit ourselves to the mission.

By way of illustration, I should like to give a different interpretation of what happened at Parménie in 1714. John Baptist de La Salle was going through then a period of deep personal crisis, at a time when the Institute was facing extinction. In the name of his commitment to association, the Brothers summoned him back to Paris to take over the government of the Institute. And he obeyed.

This return shows the re-creative power of association. It is the power of associations which sends De La Salle back to his vocation: it brings him back

to the roots of his founding inspiration; it returns him to his mission.

### 3. AVENUES TO EXPLORE

#### Clarifications

#### **Who is referred to when we speak of “Lasallian Association”?**

What I have to say has to do with intentional persons and groups who see themselves as being associated with the mission and the Institute.

Whether it is a question of persons or groups independent of the Institute or of those related structurally, a number of conditions have to be fulfilled if they are to be recognised as being “associated”. The first condition is that they have a number of Lasallian characteristics that are clearly identifiable.

The General Chapter defined associates in the following terms:

*“We recognise as being associated with the Lasallian mission all intentional groups and all persons who respond to an interior call by an educational commitment which has Lasallian characteristics, and which has been authenticated by a competent authority.*

*Together, these persons and groups are associated with the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, in order to respond, in a complementary manner, to the demands of the Lasallian mission. The charism inspiring this mission was given to St John Baptist de La Salle, and was authenticated by the Church, for the service of young people”. (Documents, page 6)*

Without wishing to go back to the language difficulties I mentioned earlier, I have to say that I still feel there are a few unanswered questions. What are the “clearly identifiable” Lasallian characteristics? What is meant by “a certain number”? Are intentional persons groups “associated with the mission and the Institute” or do these “associate themselves with the Institute for the mission”? What importance is attached to the mission by the Institute and by intentional persons and groups? What kind of relationship does the term “association”



imply between the Institute and intentional persons and groups?

I have to add that it must be difficult for a General Chapter to make a statement, addressed to the Institute as a whole, that can be applied as such to regional or local problems and situations. In view of this, I should like to stress above all the importance of the various “steps” the Chapter has indicated to help us in our efforts.

### **What are the essential points to remember about Lasallian Association?**

These follow from what has just been said. I think there are three of them.

#### **Commitment in communion with other persons**

I think that Lasallian commitment is a specific and a specifically targeted response to a call from God. This call is addressed to us through situations of poverty experienced by children, young people and adults. Our response is the educational service of the poor, which includes a pastoral dimension linked to the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

- Commitment is submitted to discernment involving other people. Likewise, it is regularly evaluated.
- It is apostolic, specific and known. It is permanent. Its Lasallian character is authenticated by Brother Visitor and his Council.
- It is adopted in partnership with other persons who share an identical spirituality, convictions and project.
- Commitment is lived out, therefore, with others. This communion has its source in a life of shared faith, prayer and Holy Scripture.

Sharing convictions inherited from the founding charism with other Lasallian groups, and structures established with a view to achieving common goals.

- Communion does not automatically imply life in common. It does imply, however, holding meetings for study and exchange as frequently as possible. It does imply a community life inspired by the Gospel. That is why its members are “*faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers*” (Ac 2,42).
- Communion is Lasallian when groups - as groups - and members - as indi-

viduals - find inspiration for their actions and their relationships in the spirituality inherited from De La Salle.

- But to be associated, the group cannot remain centred on itself. It has to be open to other groups who share the same spirituality, the same convictions and the same project. This spirituality, these convictions and this project are expressed explicitly through the Lasallian educational and pedagogical mission statement. By *educational*, I mean the references and values we wish to promote. By *pedagogical*, I mean the pedagogical aims and methodology we wish to use in order to achieve our purpose. The Lasallian educational and pedagogical mission statement is the evangelical mission inspired by the charisma of John Baptist de La Salle.
- It is the extension of the communion of persons and groups that creates association. It is association which forges and reinforces the sense of belonging; and it is the educational and pedagogical mission statement that provides the links. In other words, associating oneself creates new communion.

At this point in my reflection, I should like to add that association cannot remain informal. It has to be organised and structured in view of achieving its common purpose. However, organisation and structuring are not the point of departure, but necessary steps.

### **A link with the District and the Institute**

I don't think anyone can be Lasallian "by himself". In the same way, I don't think any group, whether it is intentional or not, can call itself Lasallian "on its own". As in the case of individual commitment, the authenticity of the Lasallian character of any communion, group or intentional association must be discerned with the District, the Brother Visitor and his Council. That is the meaning of authentication.

In the context of the shared mission, I don't think it is a question of the group merging with the Institute, or identifying itself with it and with the Brothers. For individuals and groups, associating themselves does not mean becoming integrated with the Institute.

What is central in fact is the mission and not the Institute. It is the mission which associates the Institute, individuals and groups. This means that the latter have

to associate themselves with the Institute for the accomplishment of the common mission. To set in motion a greater concentration of forces, association for individuals and groups means taking up a position in the Institute in order to make possible the Institute of tomorrow. This is the “planetary-system” model - the sun is the mission, the planets are the various Lasallian groups around the mission and interacting with one another.

In the light of this, I feel it is essential to define the specific characteristics of the partners. That is certainly one of the roles of formation. I shall return to this in my conclusion.

### **Ways forward for the future**

Some of them have already been traced out for us. Others were those sketched out during our discussions over the last two days.

### **Ways forward already traced out**

Signum Fidei groups and the French Lasallian Third Order come under this first heading. I do not know enough about the French Lasallian Third Order to be able to speak about it here, and so I shall say nothing. I shall simply make a remark about one aspect of the Signum Fidei problem which I know a little better. I think that Signum Fidei groups are associates of the Institute and its mission rather than associated with the Institute for the mission.

I think that, in his address to the General Chapter, Brother Antonio Botana identified very clearly the challenge that needed to be faced. I quote:

*At present, Signum Fidei groups correspond to the “FSC planet-satellites” model. They have a direct link with the Institute, or more precisely, with the Visitor of each District. Perhaps they need more time to mature and to assimilate the Lasallian charism; to introduce progressively links of interdependence between their groups; and to diminish progressively also their dependence on the Brothers in order to find new forms of communion with them, and reach the point that they can claim to be living a fully adult lay Christian and Lasallian life.*

During his talk on Thursday, Brother André Jacq spoke of lay participation in

District Chapter and Council meetings. He wondered just how far this participation could go. If we are to try to answer this question, we need to begin by speaking of how the Institute functions.

Most of the structures that exist today were created in response to the needs of the Institute or of Districts in which there were only Brothers. These structures, in their existing form, have been made accessible to lay persons when questions regarding the educational mission were under discussion. This results in two difficulties.

**The first:** these structures are connected with the numerous aspects of a Brother's life which impinge upon the mission. It is often difficult, if not impossible, to define the limits between the "private" areas which concern the Brothers only, and the "common" areas in which lay persons can be involved, and even participate in decision-making.

**The second:** the accessibility of FSC structures to non-Brothers can lead to a twofold confusion.

- On the one hand, people can have the impression that they are associates, or even an integral part of the Institute, and not simply associated with it.
- On the other hand, there is a danger that the sharing of the Lasallian mission will be limited to the participation of lay persons in existing structures.

To offset these difficulties, there is a need to revise and adapt structures, or create new ones.

A distinction could be made between various forms of Lasallian association. For example, between:

- the kind of association needed by institutions or particular groups, such as especially, the Institute, Signum Fidei groups, the Lasallian Third Order, Lasallian schools and institutions, in order to organise the life and activities of their members;
- forms of association enabling Lasallian associates to treat common questions relating to the mission and to the Lasallian charism in general.

Whatever form is adopted, we must always remain careful about two things. Even if they seem obvious, I still think they must be constantly borne in mind.

First, a clear distinction must always be made between guests and associates. While guests can explain things to an assembly, it is only the associates who have the authority to deliberate and to decide. Next, there are two things we need to ensure do not happen:

On the one hand, the “assimilation”, “copying”, “adaptation” for or by lay persons, of a lifestyle, a way of being or doing specific to the Brothers. On the other hand, the mixing of lay persons in the organisation or activities proper to the lives of the Brothers.

### **Ways forward sketched out in our discussions**

The organising committee has summarised the following points arising from our discussions:

A conviction linked with what Brother Antonio said yesterday about the beginnings of the Institute. There can be no Lasallian school without the existence of an adult Lasallian community. We have to look for, invent, put into effect dynamics of communion which build up the human community, the educational community, the community of faith, the ministerial community. It is difficult to establish credible dynamics of association without reflection on the way of running a school together, of exercising responsibility and power. We have to find a way of enabling people to say what they think, of challenging one another, of not confiscating the power to take decisions. In all this, mutual trust is of capital importance. How can we increase it? The source of trust is the recognition that the Spirit speaks through each one of us.

The process of association must take into account the diversity of situations, the diversity of motivation, and the diversity of ways of organising things. This applies as much to types of commitment as formation and follow-up.

The process is essential. What is important is to set people on their way, to build up contacts, even beyond District confines, to plan out a route, to experiment, to evaluate. Lasallian association will bring together people who allow themselves to be challenged by the meaning of their lives as educators, and who find some answers in John Baptist de La Salle and in those who have associated themselves with him.

## 4. GUIDELINES FOR FORMATION

The aim of the Colloquium is not only to help reflection about association. Its aim is also to draw some lessons for the formation provided by CELAS groups. As I come to the end of my talk I should like to mention three formation aims that I think are essential for Lasallian association.

### **To clarify the exercise of specific ministries in plural communities**

Over the course of centuries, the Brothers strove to define more clearly their specific collective identity, which transcended their individual identity. They did this within the framework of homogeneous ministerial communities associated in a religious institute. This institute was organised to fulfil an educational mission. Up to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Brothers fulfilled this mission on their own.

Nowadays, the same mission is shared by Brothers and laity, priests and other religious. Together, they can form plural ministerial communities. In these communities, the specific identities, roles and responsibilities of the individual members need to be clarified in order to avoid fusion, confusion and paternalism.

I think it is essential and urgent for formation to aim to clarify the different facets of the exercise of a specific ministry with a new framework, to which each one is called.

### **To bring forms of communion into existence and to develop them**

In this talk I have tried to highlight personal commitment which I consider to be the prime motive force.

I am convinced that no formula for association which does not include a lasting personal commitment can be viable. But I am equally convinced that personal commitment endures also thanks to the support of others. There is constant interaction between association and commitment. They challenge each other and strengthen each other. And so, association is above all a lived experience.

The organisers of CELAS can ensure that association is practised first of all in their own ranks. In the case of persons who are already trained, the choice of methods should concentrate on facilitating their personal commitment, and on

introducing them to a life of communion and association. CELAS does not simply provide formation: it must also encourage experiences in association by being first of all itself an example of a life of association.

At the same time, a proper structure for local accompaniment has to be established. Where possible, this could take the form of Brothers' communities welcoming and accessible to people in ways that would have to be defined. Likewise, there need to be teams of persons trained in pedagogical and pastoral accompaniment who would help to create links between various educational establishments, and between various school staffs. For this, the necessary time and human resources have to be made available.

### **Create and develop the sense of belonging**

Finally, I should like to stress the fact that it is good to bear always in mind that the more the sense of belonging is developed, the greater the individual commitment and the stronger the links of association.

In this connection, I think that the Lasallian educational mission statement which I defined earlier is a rallying point that should be promoted, because the more I accept it, the more I belong to the mission and to the association that it brings.

The Lasallian educational mission statement can be a point of departure for reflection, but also a point of arrival for individuals and school staffs. The fruit of experience and concern for children and young people, and especially for the poor, it is something that is living and which evolves. By challenging and serving as a reminder of aims and objectives, it can become a point of interaction between professional life and spirituality.

My work has enabled me to understand that it is to the extent that this mission statement is discussed, chewed over, scrutinised in a school, that the school rediscovers its common purpose. It forces the school to redefine its identity through what it does. It makes it possible for each person to give new meaning to his profession and even to his life. That is why I think that the Lasallian educational and pedagogical mission statement is one of the vital supports of Lasallian association.

A very brief conclusion to my reflection inspired by St Paul: no one knows where the Spirit comes from, nor where it goes. We must not extinguish it but welcome its action.

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