

Association According to John Baptist de La Salle

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The Initial Development

1694: A "Source" Event

In the story of Lasallian Association, an event occurs in 1694 that is a reference point for all who wish to commit themselves to the Christian education of poor children in the spirit of John Baptist de La Salle. As the 43rd General Chapter says, "The foundation event which links the Institute today to its origins is that of 6 June 1694, when John Baptist de La Salle and twelve of his followers came together to consecrate themselves for life to the Christian education of poor boys."²

This foundation event is preceded by the "Heroic Vow" of 1691, enacted privately by De La Salle, Gabriel Drolin, and Nicholas Vuyart, but the two sets of vows are both part of the same event, and we can consider them together as the central point of our foundation "mythology." This mythology refers to our Lasallian origins and goes far beyond the merely anecdotal, because it points to a lived experience that we today are invited to incarnate in very different circumstances, while still being inspired by the same spirit as De La Salle and the first Brothers.³

In our foundation mythology, we find the meaning of our Lasallian identity, which in turn enables us to feel that as part of the world and of the Church, we have something special to offer. Why does this event of 1694 have the generative power that makes it a central feature of our foundation story? The answer lies in the four elements that go to make up an act of association: (1) the commitment of individuals; (2) the charism, or unifying spirit, that inspires the commitment; (3) the communion among those who make the commitment; and (4) the mission (the Christian education of the poor), which is the reason for the preceding three elements. These four components give the term "Lasallian association" its special meaning and make it fundamentally different than what is usually meant by "association" in current usage.

The Roots: The Journey of a "Community for Educating the Poor"

The event of 1694 and the developments that flow from it do not come about by chance. They are part of, and the effect of, a process; they make sense only when seen as part of that process.

Lasallian Association has a period of gestation (the 1680s) that coincides with the start of a journey for that first community comprised of De La Salle and his first Brother teachers, scattered as they are among several houses. That journey involves a meeting point of different lifestyles, which is brought about by the need to discover a response to the educational needs of poor children.

Looking back on that period of gestation, we can see that association is not developed for its own sake but for the educational needs of abandoned children and young people who are "far from salvation." This call, read from the point of view of faith, is also interpreted as a call from God.

The willingness to respond to this call from God and from poor children is the driving force of what will become Lasallian association.

This journey transforms people. They discover one another within salvation history, which has concrete names and faces. They experience communion with others who are inspired by the same spirit. They enter a ministry that increases their responsibility toward God, the Church, and the beneficiaries of their mission. The result of the process is a new identity, shaped by the Lasallian charism.

Their journey, inspired by the charism, or spirit, leads them to see the importance and the necessity of community as a means of fulfilling the educational mission and as a sign of the educational gift they are offering their society.

The journey also shows them the weaknesses of community, which stem from the limitations in the community's external and internal horizons. Community is threatened by short-term interests, pragmatism, and practical limitations, all of which can suffocate it as soon as it loses sight of its mission. Above all, community is threatened by the fatigue and the inconsistency of the people who compose it, by a lack of internal commitment, and by the lack of roots.

The crisis of 1690, when half the Brothers leave the Lasallian community, illustrates most clearly an internal lack of personal commitment, which can only be made by persons who are inwardly secure in God, in communion with their Brothers, and responsible for the work God has entrusted to them.

The Vow of Association: A Prophetic Gesture Directed Toward the Future

The vow of association, in 1691 and in 1694, is the dawn of Lasallian Association. It also resolves a crisis by joining together two parts of the story at the precise moment when continuity is in danger of breaking down. The act of consecration links three elements: confidence in God, to whom the work is dedicated; solidarity with the Brothers, who are needed to carry out the work; and responsibility for the beneficiaries of the work. Externally, the vow adds nothing to the mission or to the community, but internally it sets them in a specific relationship with God. It gives people greater strength to carry out the project.

The vow projects into the future what De La Salle and his Brothers are already living. As a prophetic gesture, it affirms that God is present in the work they are doing. Therefore, in spite of the work's apparent fragility, they can commit their life to it and thus give continuity to the experience.

The formula of consecration, or act of commitment, of John Baptist de La Salle and his Brothers expresses as a single whole the relationship between "community" and "association for the mission." The relationship includes a community lifestyle as well as a radicalness in the objectives of association and the order of priority among the options to be taken in life. Viewed in this way, commitment means complete solidarity with the members of the community and the objectives of association, to which individual interests and needs are subordinated. In other words, the type of association established by the commitment of John Baptist de La Salle and his Brothers corresponds to what is termed an "intentional community."

The formula of vows begins by addressing the Trinity as the ultimate reference for Lasallian association, because it is the model for communion related to mission and because it, rather than a person's capacity for commitment and generosity, forms the ultimate foundation on which association rests.

The aim of this consecration is stated as twofold: to glorify God and to form a community for the purpose of educating poor children. By uniting and giving both aims equal value, the act of consecration powerfully expresses the unity of the Brother's life. The commitment is to "unite myself and to remain in society with the Brothers," and it is made specific in the three vows of "association, stability, and obedience." Each vow reinforces a different aspect of communion for the sake of mission:

- "I unite myself to these Brothers."
- "I promise to remain faithful, and they can count on me, come what may."
- "I will accept what they decide."

Note that the three vows, although addressed to God, are directed toward the Brothers with whom the person is associating and the goals are to be fulfilled.

The commitment is not, therefore, primarily to the work in the schools but to association, that is to say, to community for the sake of free schools for poor students. From the very beginning, it is quite clear where the center of gravity lies: it is in communion, as the means adopted, which distinguishes the Lasallian project and is experienced in the fraternal relationship among the members of the Society, rather than in the apostolic endeavor in itself, although this activity is the aim of the communion.

The goal – the maintenance of free schools – implies that the preferred recipients are poor children. The strength of association is directed toward poor students, not exclusively, but with a strong preference. It is the aim of the Society, and it must be fulfilled by the Society, not by each member individually. Therefore, each member must undertake to do whatever work he is given in the Society.

"Together and by association" indicates the manner in which the work will be carried out. It also points to the necessary, but fruitful, tension between, on the one hand, the immediacy and closeness with the people being helped (which favors the development of local community) and, on the other hand, the universality and breadth of vision characteristic of an Institute.

Of all those who in 1694 are members of the Community of the Christian Schools, only some express their commitment by a vow of association (consecration). However, their action has a prophetic aspect that extends to the entire community. The rest of the members are affected by the consequences of this gesture, and they, in turn, make their contribution to the establishment of the Society and the achievement of the goals. The action of a few benefits all, is a reference point for all, and serves to bind them all into the Society.

Association Affirms the Community and Directs It to God and the Mission

Association is born in community and by experiencing community, but it is also a means of giving security and strength to the community, both inwardly and outwardly.

- Association develops the roots of a community and strengthens its internal links so that it can better fulfill its mission.
- When joined with consecration, association points to God as the foundation of the community and to the work of education as God's Work.
- Association universalizes in time and space the experience of "community for the education of the poor."
- Association guarantees the continuation of the community beyond its concrete existence in a given time and space.

The fluid relationship that exists between community and association makes the boundaries between them flexible. The local community sees itself as an integral part of a wider association, and because of this feeling of belonging, it acts as the association's delegate, or agent, to ensure that the local project fulfills the aims of the association.

The Community of the Christian Schools, as the totality of local communities, acts in solidarity to carry out responsibility for educational projects. The problems and needs of a local community are viewed as the problems and needs of the whole association. The vow of association enables us to speak of a "ministering community."

Association develops the bonds of communion among the people in it. Consequently, the collective structures that characterize the Lasallian Association (the Institute first, and then each District) tend to organize themselves as communities that foster personal relationships rather than as organizations for the smooth running of institutions.

The main goal of association is to promote living communities that can be signs of the mission. Members of an association make it their first commitment to contribute to the establishment of communities. Consequently, community and association, in the Lasallian context, must be seen not so much as two different realities but as two dimensions of the same reality. They cannot exist independently of each other.

The Theological Foundation of Association is "Communion for the Mission": A Sacramental View of Association

The "Community of the Christians Schools" is established primarily not as a work group but as a community of people who feel called by Jesus Christ and sent to represent him. Lasallian association relies not on efficient organization but on the relationship among people who feel themselves called and sent to carry out God's work.

Therefore, the mystical and vital nucleus of Lasallian association is "communion for the mission," in its theological and ecclesiological sense. We are called by God to be God's representatives among the young. We feel saved and sent to save others. We experience God's love, and we transmit it to the young. This is the spirit of faith and zeal.

We are constituted as an evangelizing community: a community of Brothers who announce and promote brotherhood. This is the message the Founder wants to convey: “That which is of the utmost importance, and to which the greatest attention should be given in an Institute, is that all who compose it possess the spirit peculiar to it.”⁴ He refers to this “community spirit” more explicitly in another text: “Jesus Christ is in the midst of the Brothers.”⁵ Jesus Christ and the Spirit assemble the community for the mission entrusted to it. They supply the community with its specific (charismatic) identity so that it fulfils its mission.

The result of this communion for the mission is a ministering community and a community ministry: a communion that realizes it is called to carry out God’s work (identified as the education of poor children) in a ministry that is carried out not individually but in a community whose members make their contribution in different ways and with different degrees of commitment.

The community is consecrated not by an additional sacrament or by the canonical vows but by Christ’s presence in it. We are dealing with a lay dynamism that has its source in the sacraments of Christian initiation, activated in the spirit of faith. Thanks to this spirit, the community discovers God acting in and through it.

In this community “charisms” occur; in turn, these charisms produce the spirituality that gives meaning to the mission. This process is the origin of the Lasallian identity. The spirituality and the mission are made explicit and up to date in and through community.

Developing a New Type of Association

The Gestation Phase: Developing a Communion of Mission Through a Vocation Journey

Developing a new kind of Lasallian association requires a period of gestation, as does the first. It is not simply generated spontaneously by goodwill. Applying to the current situation of the Lasallian mission the phases of development that operate at the time of origins, prior to the act of association of 1694, will involve us in a similar kind of journey, a journey with two main lines of direction: one toward community and one toward individual identity.

The journey is open to all who are contributing to Lasallian educational projects. It includes a process of communion for the mission, within which the vocational itinerary of each educator unfolds.

The process of communion for the mission involves the continual creation of interpersonal links among the whole group of educators, Brothers and laypeople. These links promote mutual appreciation, solidarity, and responsibility. Thus, they give life to the educational community; they develop a communion of faith until it gives birth to the Christian community. They come together around God’s work; they encourage mutual commitment and the experience of sharing the ministry; they lead to the formation of a ministering community that makes itself responsible for giving life to the educational work, according to the Lasallian charism.

The process of communion must include the promotion of each educator’s vocation journey, which leads everyone to discover a deeper meaning in his or her educational activity, including

pastoral work. The process develops the vocational itinerary and the community dimension of the person's identity. If faith is present, the journey leads people to experience their work in education as a meeting place with God, until they come to experience education as a ministry based on firm commitment. This last step already brings people to the threshold of full Lasallian association.

In a word, the invitation is to an experience of communion: the relationship that exists among people with a common spirit. Being in communion is not limited to promoting relationships among the people involved in the Lasallian project. It must also develop a shared Lasallian charism. In other words, it promotes a relationship based on the characteristic spirit of the Lasallian charism.

The Lasallian charism is present throughout the entire process. It is the constructive axis in the identity and formation of Lasallian educators. It is the orientation inherent in the whole process, and it implies a certain style, a special sensitivity in the face of evident needs. It involves certain preferences when selecting pupils, certain criteria and options when planning the response and evaluating the mission.

The charism is the basis for Lasallian spirituality, which accompanies the whole process of the educator's training: (1) revealing the meaning and human depth of the work of education; and (2) showing it to be a privileged place in the educator's relationship with God.

The charism is made visible in an historical heritage that brings along with it a particular culture. Lasallian culture refers, first of all, to the historical journey of John Baptist de La Salle and his Institute, to certain pedagogical achievements, and to certain expressions of faith. All this can be communicated at given moments of formation, depending on the receptivity of those for whom it is intended.

The natural result of this process is the integration of individuals into local communities at different levels, whether that of an educational community or that of a community of faith. On a more generalized level, we can speak of a Lasallian spiritual family.

We must remember that we are dealing with a long, complex process, because it involves setting out on a life journey that implies personal transformation. It also means entering into a new system of interpersonal relationships and into the historical heritage that offers motivation and requires a period of formation. Its development is absolutely necessary before people can choose to make a commitment to Lasallian association.

People who join, consciously or not, the Lasallian spiritual family are personally enriched, and they collaborate in certain aspects of the mission; however, they have no obligation (apart from a moral one) to commit their entire self. They benefit from a share in the Lasallian heritage to varying degrees, but they have not yet established a relationship of belonging, or membership. They are only working with the Institute, or the Association. Their responsibility regarding the mission is limited to the conditions they set down at any given moment. We are not yet talking about "associates."

Commitment as a Life Option: The Starting Point of a New Kind of Lasallian Association

Undergoing a course of Lasallian induction, even when it helps to give meaning to a person's actions, is not the same as making a complete commitment to Lasallian association. The former is a general goal desirable for as many as possible of the laypeople who collaborate in Lasallian educational works. Commitment is a question of vocation and can be expected from only a much smaller number.

The initial, historical form of Lasallian association comes into being through the commitment embodied in the act of association of 1694. Similarly, the starting point for any new forms of Lasallian association must also be a commitment accompanied by a symbolic act, because association cannot exist without a visible commitment by those who are associating.

Motivation: Just as at the beginnings of Lasallian association, any new form of association must find its core motivation in the educational needs of young people who are "far from salvation" and in the desire to respond to what is seen as a call by God. The commitment is part of a journey in relationships, in three dimensions: God, the community, and the young people.

Individuals can start the journey via any of these dimensions. Once they are on the way, the driving force and the motivation for the process are the call of the abandoned young people and the urge to respond to it. This purpose shapes the other two dimensions and justifies the existence and the process of association.

Commitment: The establishment of a project depends on everyone who is involved in it, including those whose involvement is only temporary or whose motives are varied. But if a project is to continue, especially on the broader scale, it needs stability in the form of people who are committed to staying and making the maintenance of the project their priority, above their own personal interests. The faithfulness of the project to its initial purposes and to its preferred beneficiaries depends on the presence of "prophets," in the form of people willing to make a point of ensuring this faithfulness. Commitment that is both stable and principled is what allows "association" to fulfill its purpose.

Part of a Journey: Acts of commitment are not decided on overnight. They must be discerned as part of an itinerary in which people discover the direction they want to give to their life and what God is asking of them. Account must be taken of the individual's capacities and of the implications of the commitment. Even then, it is a risky venture. The process of communion for the mission, mentioned above, is what prepares the way for commitment to association; without this process the step cannot be made.

The process enables us to relive the foundation story ("myth"). Little by little, we are empowered to narrate our own story as the actualization of this myth. The story will combine in various ways the essential components of association: communion, Lasallian charism, commitment, and mission. Commitment to association should not be made before a person achieves a certain harmonious synthesis of these four components.

Symbols: Association is established through signs that symbolize solidarity and interdependence. Commitment needs to be expressed by agreed-upon symbols that embody the

essence of the commitment. We need to support one another, and we need to know on whom we can rely and count, and to what extent.

The commitment required for association relates to people (the other members of the association) rather than to activities. It does not refer primarily to the work or task, nor does it consist in doing extra things. It is a commitment to the Lasallian community on one level or another. It involves relationships, sharing, and communion. Finally, it manifests itself in belonging. It is a bond that creates solidarity among people and makes them dependent on one another. It is not just a question of “taking part in” but of “belonging to,” “depending on,” or better still, “being interdependent.” That is what creates association.

The symbol by which people commit themselves also makes the community a more visible sign, just as the first goal of association is to establish community as a sign. Consequently, any commitment to association should be followed, and frequently preceded, by active integration with the other associates through various community structures at both the general and the local level.

Community is inseparable from and justified by its purpose. To commit to the community is to strengthen the sign it gives when it serves its purpose: the evangelization of abandoned youth through education. It is the “Community of the Christian Schools.”

To commit is to adopt the aims of the Lasallian community as a personal goal:

- preferring “abandoned” children, especially the poorest, as the beneficiaries
- giving them a comprehensive education that is inspired by the Gospel

Consequently, commitment means both involvement in the process of evaluation and discernment of the educational work to make it match the Lasallian project more closely.

Commitment Introduces People into a Process of Transcendence

The commitment to association can take various forms. All of them have as their common denominator the will to incarnate the Lasallian charism today, in communion with other Lasallians, for the Christian education of youth, especially the poor, and to do it with a certain stability.

Whatever form it takes, the commitment to association is a leap, large or small, because it involves a change of level: from the concrete and the particular to the universal. It is not a flight from reality, because the leap always returns to discover the universal dimension lying in the concrete and the particular.

The commitment involves, first of all, transcending the immediate so as not to be dominated by the concrete circumstances that surround a project – refusing to be dependent on the success or failure of the project or to limit a person’s enthusiasm only to the concrete recipients of the project. All this happens because the person, illuminated by faith, transcends the particular situation and feels that he or she is partaking in the Plan of God, the Work of God, the Kingdom of God. People learn to see themselves as instruments in the service of this work, and from this

global perspective, they return to the particular project in which they fulfill, here and now, the mission received from God.

Commitment also implies transcending, without renouncing, the bonds characteristic of local community: personal sympathies, abilities and interests of specific individuals, internal plans. They are related to the wider horizon of communion for the Lasallian mission. This communion includes other people whom we have not chosen but with whom we share a call to the Lasallian mission. The commitment underpins the mission, which is the community's authentic foundation and motivation.

Thanks to this commitment, community becomes a ministry. The responsibility assumed in community, before God and the Church with respect to the mission and the projects in which the mission is specified, becomes the priority rather than the personal whims or wishes of the moment.

Finally, commitment to association implies transcending the strategies used to analyze the situation of poor children and to look for answers, not because they are unimportant but because the Lasallian charism, or spirit, goes beyond strategies. Those who commit themselves to Lasallian association have already discovered in their hearts the light with which God enlightens "those whom He has chosen to announce his word to the children."⁶ That is why they are not content with a technical analysis but need a spirituality that enables them to find the meaning of what is being done and to live it wholeheartedly. Commitment implies the decision to live by Lasallian spirituality so as to incarnate the Lasallian charism in the Church and in the world today.

The commitment to Lasallian association is more an act of offering than a contract, even if it also has the characteristics of a contract. In the same way, Lasallian association is more a communion of people united by the Spirit to serve the educational mission than an organization, even if it is also an organization.

This act of commitment is usually expressed as a personal offering in the form of a vow, a promise, a sign of availability, and so on, indicating the three recipients of the offering: God as origin and end of our offering, the other partners in the association as mediators of the offering, and those who are the reason for this association, the young people and their needs.

The mediators of the offering are the other associates. In a general sense, this includes all those who share in the Lasallian mission, but in a specific and explicit way, the commitment to association refers to the people of a group or institution with whom we agree to work in an interdependent way to achieve the association's purpose.

The act of commitment substantially expresses the reasons for the association. Historically, the Lasallian charism arises for a clear purpose: "the human and Christian education of the young, especially the poor." Nevertheless, while respecting the integral unity of the project and without losing sight of the whole, it is possible to stress some core aspects: education for justice, the strengthening of the community in all its educational aspects, the growth of interiority and of

faith. Above all, new situations and needs of the young can give rise to new ways of applying the Lasallian charism and living it in community. It is the Spirit who decides.

The object of the offering, the substance of the commitment, is oneself: a life is at stake. People commit themselves to a way of life in solidarity with others because of attitudes that guide their life in a particular direction. We should make a distinction between benefactors, who donate their time or money, and Lasallian associates, who donate themselves and become interdependent with others.

Commitment is life; it goes far beyond the sign that expresses it and must not be confused with this sign. Association needs signs if it is to have the visible and institutional form that is a necessary condition for its continuity. However, inside the association not everyone needs to express this personal commitment with a sign.

What is necessary is that the associates live their commitment visibly. They do this in two ways.

First, they live out communion for the mission with a clear feeling of membership and interdependence on two closely related levels:

- On the local level, in a group of people with whom they live in communion “here and now,” and share and deepen the Lasallian charism. With them they try to build or strengthen the local community as a sign for the recipients of the mission. For this reason, they work to develop bonds of communion with other groups of associates, whether laypeople or Brothers, and with all others who share the mission.
- On a more general level, through the Lasallian Institute to which the groups are attached. The Institute is the point of reference for maturation in the Lasallian charism. Solidarity with the rest of the Lasallian association takes place through the Institute.

Second, lifelong availability for the mission becomes operative when embodied in a more or less structured and detailed plan that follows in its main outline the two levels of interdependence: the Lasallian Institute and the local group or community. The plan is directly related to the type of associates (single, married, ordained, vowed religious) and to the Lasallian spiritual direction that is suitable for each type. The plan must specify:

- the relationship to, and participation in, the Lasallian heritage
- the relationship of its specific Christian identity to the Lasallian mission
- the contribution to creating community
- the experience of Lasallian spirituality
- the availability for the mission
- the interdependence with the Lasallian Institute
- the continuing formation of the members

Notes

1. Brother Antonio Botana, FSC, chaired the International Commission on Association from 2000 to 2007. The Commission was established by the Superior General in 2000 to advance a number of propositions from the 43rd General Chapter related to Lasallian association for mission as it applied to Brothers and to lay partners. During his time leading the commission, he chaired the International Commission on Association; studied the history, development, and current experience of Lasallian association; and wrote extensively on these topics. Two of his works are cited and utilized with particular frequency in formation programs and advanced Lasallian studies: "Basis for a Present-day Model of the Lasallian Family," (Rome, Italy: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2008), and "Thematic Vocabulary of Lasallian Association," (Rome, Italy: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2008).

2. Brothers of the Christian Schools, *Circular 447: The Documents of the 43rd General Chapter, 2*. (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2000).

3. Brother John Johnston, *Pastoral Letter* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, January 2000).

4. John Baptist de La Salle, *Rule of 1718*, chapter 2. Found in *Rule and Foundational Documents*, Vol. 7 of Lasallian Sources: The Complete Works of John Baptist de La Salle (2002).

5. John Baptist de La Salle, *Explanation of the Method of Interior Prayer*. Translated by Richard Arandez and edited by Donald Mouton (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1995), 29.

6. John Baptist de La Salle, *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*. Translated by Richard Arandez and Augustine Loes, and edited by Augustine Loes and Francis Huether (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1994), 193.1.