

Future Prospects for Creating Association

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To begin with, I offer two remarks to explain the spirit and limitations of what I have to say. First, my point of view is that of a layperson. I feel this is a factor that needs to be stressed in this introduction. Second, I do not think John Baptist de La Salle thought out or planned association. He was a pragmatic person. He chose, evaluated, and organized 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 God.

Just like De La Salle, we are "passengers on a boat without sails or oars."¹ I do not know what obstacles lay on the way to association. I do not know any route that will be safe. I have no guide, no formula, and no model to follow. I place my trust in my compass. It points toward the star, which lights up my way.

I restrict myself to considering a few basic points:

- difficulties involved in "association"
- factors conducive to association
- avenues to explore
- essential points to remember
- ways forward for the future

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 life, and our education. I find it, therefore, somewhat risky to try to work out a general definition that would be valid for everyone. Even if I managed to do so, everyone would adapt it to his or her 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 Institute.

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

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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 recognize 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*” that is now paramount. It is “*association*” that 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 contract 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

These difficulties arise from trying to adapt the historical model of Lasallian association to our present-day situation. Originally, Lasallian association was between individuals inspired by the same spirit of faith. Initially, these individuals committed themselves by vows that 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.

Motivation, the Level of Commitment, the State of Life of Individuals

Nowadays, school staffs are heterogeneous. They are so because of the members that compose them. They are formed of Christians, persons affiliated with other faiths of the world, and persons with no religious affiliation. Christians are sometimes in the minority. We find the following statistics for Catholic schools in French-speaking Belgium: 5% are practicing Christians; just over 10% are “believers”, and just under 80% do not identify with a Christian tradition. 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 Christian staff, some practice 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 laypeople. Many are married and/or have children of various ages; their first

duty is to their family. There are many schools where there have not been any Brothers for years, and the students taught by Brothers are now approaching retirement age. It is obvious that the differences of motivation, degrees of commitment, and states of life of school staff members determine the degree of their involvement in the work of the school.

Different Degrees 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 their professional work 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 vary greatly. The educational mission is presented in the form of an educational and pedagogical mission statement that is based on the values the school wishes to promote.

- Some people accept the mission statement fully.
- Others go along with it.
- Others adopt an attitude of benevolent neutrality toward it, 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 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 practiced more or less intensely and the exercise of the profession, and especially on the difficulty of constructing teaching as a form of evangelization.

The Practice and the Reality of “Educational” Communities

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

There are two things to be noted about shared mission.

- On the one hand, the sharing of the mission by its nature transcends status, and so Brothers and laypeople, laypeople and laypeople, principals and teachers, administrators and colleagues, 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 laypeople. This makes it difficult to work “together.”

- On the other hand, instead of sharing convictions and plans, some people 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 that extends beyond the walls of the school. If people work together “locally,” it is difficult to work “in association”.

2. Factors Conducive to 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.”²

This process of association did not come about immediately. It should be noted, however, that from about 1680, the need for standardizing 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, and
- to help them integrate their spirituality with their daily life.

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 of 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?³

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,
- to join others to share projects, resources, strategies, and practices,
- to adopt forms of action and bring them to a successful conclusion, and
- to give them meaning by finding support for them in our faith, in a community of faith, in what the 43rd General Chapter called “intentional groups,” in other communities of faith, in other intentional groups.⁴

Fidelity to a Call, to Something Specific

My work as an advisor for school programs in the District of South Belgium 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 globalization. There was a real fear of becoming diluted and dissolved in a monochromatic Catholic education system, or even in a single and colorless educational system.

I am convinced that what makes Christian education so rich is the mosaic of specific elements inherited from the charisms 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 Lasallian Association colloquium in France in November 1998, Professor 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 characterized 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, 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 Professor Avanzini. This same strength can make us return to the founding inspiration and to commit ourselves to the mission.

By way of illustration, I would like to give a different interpretation of what happened at Parménie in 1714. John Baptist de La Salle was then going through 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 association that 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

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 individuals or groups independent of the Institute or of those related structurally, a number of conditions have to be fulfilled if they are to be recognized 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 recognize 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 Saint John Baptist de La Salle, and was authenticated by the Church, for the service of young people.⁵

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 the 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 want to stress above all the importance of the various “steps” the Chapter has indicated to help us in our efforts.

4. Essential Points to Remember

Commitment in Communion with Other People

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 a Brother Visitor and his Council.
- It is adopted in partnership with other people who share an identical spirituality, convictions, and project.
- Commitment is lived out, therefore, with others and has its source in a life of shared faith, prayer, and the Scriptures.

Convictions inherited from the founding charism are shared with other Lasallian groups, and structures are 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 “devoted to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42).
- Communion is Lasallian when groups (as groups) and members (as individuals) find inspiration for their actions and their relationships in the spirituality inherited from De La Salle.

- But to be associated, the group cannot remain centered on itself. It has to be open to other groups that 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 to achieve our purpose. The Lasallian educational and pedagogical mission statement is the evangelical mission inspired by the charism of John Baptist de La Salle.
- The extension of the communion of persons and groups creates association. Association forges and reinforces the sense of belonging, and the educational and pedagogical mission statement provides the links. In other words, associating oneself creates new communion.

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

Links with the Institute through a “District”

I don't think anyone can be Lasallian “in isolation.” In the same way, I don't think any group, whether or not intentional, 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's merging with the Institute or identifying 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 that 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 in which the sun is the mission and the planets are the various Lasallian groups around the mission and interacting with one another.

In light of this, I feel it is essential to define the specific characteristics of the partners.

5. Ways Forward for the Future

There is a need to revise and adapt structures or to create new ones. A distinction could be made between various forms of Lasallian association, for example:

- 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 organize 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 forms are 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,” or “adaptation” for or by laypeople of a lifestyle, a way of being or doing, specific to the Brothers;
- on the other hand, the mixing of laypeople in the organization or activities proper to the life of the Brothers.

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 that 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 make 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 organizing things. This applies as much to types of commitment as to formation and to 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.

Specific Ministries in Plural Communities

Nowadays, the same mission is shared by Brothers, 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 to avoid fusion, confusion, and paternalism. I think it is essential and urgent to clarify the different facets of the exercise of a specific ministry with a new framework to which each one is called.

Create and Develop Communion

In this talk I have tried to highlight personal commitment, which I consider to be the prime motivating force. I am convinced that any viable formula for association must include a lasting personal commitment. But I am equally convinced that personal commitment also endures thanks to the support of others. There is constant interaction between association and

commitment. They challenge and strengthen each other. Thus, association is, above all, a lived experience.

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

Create and Develop the Sense of Belonging

Finally, I want to stress the fact that it is always good to bear 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 both a point of departure for reflection and also a point of arrival for individuals and school staffs. The fruit of experience and concern for children and young people, especially for the poor, is something that is living and that 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, scrutinized in a school, that the school rediscovers its common purpose. Such processes force the school to redefine its identity through what it does and make 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.

No one knows where the Spirit comes from or where it is going. We must not extinguish it but welcome its action.

Notes

1. John Baptist de La Salle, *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, No. 134.1.
2. *Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools*, article 1.1.
3. Referring to the millions of youth who joined Pope John Paul II for worship and to celebrate unity in the presence of diversity at World Youth Day in 1997 (Paris, France) and in 2000 (Rome, Italy).
4. *The Acts of the 43rd General Chapter (Circular 447)*, 5-6.
5. *The Acts of the 43rd General Chapter (Circular 447)*, 6.