
Shared Mission Twenty-Seven Years Later

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An Overview

The expression "shared mission" was coined by members of the International Rule Commission in 1984 as a provisional title to article #17 of what was eventually *The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* approved by the Vatican's Congregation for Religious in 1987.³ The Institute, in the General Chapter of 1986, adopted the term and used the word "partners" as a general term to describe men and women contributing to the Lasallian mission. In response to a direction from the 1993 General Chapter, the General Council in 1997 published an important document under the title *The Lasallian Mission of Human and Christian Education: A Shared Mission*.⁴ It is a matter of regret that the General Council's invitation to have this document published in a format suited to the language and culture of each District of the Institute meant that it was never given an official number as were other Institute *Circulars* and publications.

During the 1976 General Chapter there had been an official approval of the *Signum Fidei* movement when a group of European members, organized according to statutes set out by Brother Paulus Adams and Brother Manuel Olivé, committed themselves to the Lasallian movement in the Mother House chapel in the presence of the General Chapter delegates.

Discussion preceding and following this event during the 1976 General Chapter had led to discussion of "degrees" or "levels" of membership, a discussion that was to last through the next three General Chapters and found a particular formulation in the General Chapter of 2000 which specified the conditions under which someone who was not a member of the Institute could be formally recognized as an "associate" by the Brother Visitor and his Council.⁵ It is worth noting that this understanding of "associate" was formulated completely from the viewpoint of the Brothers and that many lay people, very committed to the Lasallian mission of human and Christian education, rejected such a procedure on the grounds that it established a type of "hierarchy" or "elite" which they thought destructive of mutual trust.

An important point, however, made during discussions on "membership" during the 1976 General Chapter was lost sight of for some time. This was the suggestion that the operative word for continuing discussion should not be around "degrees of *membership*" but rather around "degrees of *belonging*."⁶ The argument was that a person freely *chooses* to belong to some organization, club, or activity and implicitly accepts the basic conditions required of a member. Although certain exclusive clubs have stringent rules that may require such things as a dress code and participation in all activities, many other clubs and organizations, recognizing the importance of individual choice, invite members to a degree of participation that they themselves choose. I suggest these ideas of "invitation" and "choice" are the important lenses through which to look, in today's world, where "shared mission" is in the Institute's works.

What Has Changed?

The official Institute statistics show that there are some 89,000 people not members of the Institute (slightly more women than men) engaged in Lasallian works of various kinds around the world, constituting over 98% of the total. The contribution made by the Brothers is, therefore, much more *qualitative* than quantitative. Two of the constitutive dimensions of the Brother's life as formulated in article #10 of the 1987 *Rule*, therefore, "the apostolic ministry of education" and "community life," have undergone considerable change from what was envisaged since the origins of the Institute. The "ministry of education especially for the poor" is shared with others who are not members of the Institute and so too is that part of "community" life formed with others in carrying out together the daily work in different forms of Lasallian education. The experience of the world-wide Institute shows that the people engaged in Lasallian works do so for a wide variety of reasons ranging from *idealism* to *employment*, with many shades of meaning in between.

There is more. The foundation of the Brothers as a non-clerical Institute, expressed in the consecration of the twelve Brothers with John Baptist de La Salle on 6 June 1694, was a lifelong vow of "association" in a celibate "community" for the educational service of the poor.⁷ Today, as the Brothers have revised their *Rule* of 1987, they have indeed, in response to the Church's invitation to Institutes in the Vatican Council II document *Perfectae Caritatis*⁸ to return to their origins, re-ordered their formulation of their religious consecration on the foundation vows of "association," "obedience" and "stability." The document *Vita Consecrata* from the 1994 Vatican Synod on Consecrated Life points toward radical changes already taking place in the world. It notes not only that

today, often as a result of new situations, many Institutes have come to the conclusion that *their charism can be shared with the laity*. The laity are therefore invited to share more intensely in the spirituality and mission of these Institutes⁹

but also that

these new experiences . . . can in fact give rise to the spread of a fruitful spirituality beyond the confines of the Institute, which will then be in a position to ensure the continuity in the Church of the services typical of the Institute. Another positive consequence will be to facilitate more intense cooperation between consecrated persons and the laity in view of the Institute's mission.¹⁰

The document then recognizes that

a significant expression of lay people's sharing in the richness of the consecrated life is their participation in various Institutes under the new form of so-called *associate members* [emphasis added] or, in response to conditions present in certain cultures, as people *who share fully for a certain period of time* [emphasis added] the Institute's community life and its particular dedication to contemplation or the apostolate.¹¹

“Community” and “Association”

Most Brothers active in various educational ministries today share their working hours with their lay colleagues as members of an educational “community” formed around a common task. More and more, their challenge is to be the Gospel and Institute “leaven” that helps to keep alive the collective memory and heritage as their particular contribution to the “community” formed around the common project. The Brothers, in this sense, while still living in their own religious community, are like many people today in becoming members of different kinds of “communities.”

Fidelity to the Lasallian heritage is encouraged in the explicit or implicit invitation to all members of this *ad hoc* community to “associate” themselves so as to maintain and develop this heritage according to circumstances; but it is fundamental to understand that such development is not simply one of tradition, like conserving something in a ritual or in a museum. In this rapidly changing and pluralist world today, the title of #3.26 of the General Council’s 1997 document on shared mission is prophetic in stating that *every Lasallian educator enriches shared mission*; and the document goes on to say that

to the extent that these educators feel that they can bring *their own particular gifts* [emphasis added] . . . they can legitimately feel themselves *sharers* of the overall *educational mission* . . . They should feel as well that they bring distinctive elements of their own traditions as Protestant Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Confucianists or Shintoists to the religious understandings and spiritual traditions that are essential to Lasallian education . . . In this *important exchange of gifts* [emphasis added], the Lasallian school can help to further the important principles of ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue.¹²

Such an evolution cannot take place without occasional tensions between the heritage and the unforeseen demands of the present. In the history of the Institute, there are two unfortunate examples from which we need to learn: the stubborn maintenance of the foundation principles of absolute gratuity and the prohibition against classical studies and the teaching of Latin.

As Brother Bruno Alpago has shown in his magisterial study of the principle of gratuity,¹³ the circumstances in France by the 19th century had changed sufficiently for the State to begin founding schools or supporting existing schools by seeking financial support from the local community. The blanket refusal of the Brothers to revise the principle of gratuity from the absolute sense of its foundation in a very different society led to their being forced to withdraw from many village and small town schools where parents were being asked to contribute to the support of the school. In a similar way, the refusal by the Institute’s Superiors to come to terms with the minority position of Catholics in most English-speaking countries led to severe penalties being imposed on the leaders of Lasallian institutions that, at the request of the local hierarchy, taught Latin in schools and universities.¹⁴ In both cases, subsequent reflection on the issues involved demonstrated the inability of the Institute’s leaders to adapt to changed cultural circumstances. Their insistence on maintaining a literal fidelity to particular traditions of the original *Rule* became a strait-jacket which seems to have obscured their understanding of the values of the overall Lasallian heritage as such.

Some Implications for Today

Since the foundation principles of “community” and “association” for the Brothers have taken on an enlarged meaning today, it seems important to recognize that what has already happened has gradually changed the public face of everything that comes under the general description of Lasallian education. It is simply a matter of fact that a growing number of Lasallian educational works around the world no longer have Brothers in all the executive positions, and individual Brothers come under the same conditions of employment as other teachers.

As regards “association,” the Institute wishes to regain the importance of the foundation vow as the basis for the Brother’s consecration. At the same time, the Institute recognizes that the citations from *Vita Consecrata* speak of something new already taking place as the *charism* is shown to be shared. It is here that the role of the Institute and of the individual Brother is that of extending the invitation to other people to “associate” themselves by their willingness to share in the Lasallian heritage. It is not necessarily to invite them to share the Brother’s community life, although this is already taking place to some extent in widely different cultural circumstances. It is a sharing of gifts by which the Brother extends the Institute’s gift of “community” in the willingness to form “community” with others in the common task so that all feel a sense of “belonging” in their collective contribution to the principles of Lasallian education.

This idea is possibly best addressed through the image of a journeying together toward something always in the process of being realized, rather than in any unchanging final form. While the Brother may be in theory what the 1986 Institute *Circular* on “The Lasallian Family” called the “heart” and “memory” of the Lasallian heritage,¹⁵ it is in the sharing of this heritage that something new and quite diversified can emerge as the individual gifts of all the participants are shared. It will always be recognized as Lasallian by the attention given to meeting local “needs” and by the quality of the “relationships” among all who form the educational “community,” teachers as well as those taught.

Is such a view simply unrealistic? The history of the Institute shows that part of its original genius has been its ability to maintain its unity of Lasallian principles while adapting itself to situations that have transcended the original categories of *race, language, religion, and gender*. The history of the Brothers in Asia since 1852, and in many other countries, shows the delicate way in which they offered the gift of Christian education by developing their works as a “Christian presence,” respecting the cultures of the multi-religious countries in which they worked. There are numerous instances where the defense of their works by local authorities in times of difficulties showed how importantly this “presence” was viewed. Since 1975 the Brothers in Vietnam, with their 24 schools closed and the properties taken, have shown a remarkable ability to adapt to a new situation by, in their own words, “rediscovering the poor” and continuing to attract young people who wish to “associate” with them.

Toward a Conclusion

The key words that frame the concepts that give meaning today to the *Lasallian Mission of Human and Christian Education: A Shared Mission* are “invitation,” “belonging,” “association,” and “community.” Each word needs to be explored in terms of its own richness. An “invitation”

can be accepted; it can be ignored as well as being rejected. People choose to “belong.” Their contribution to belonging is what they will ultimately measure for themselves. A sense of “belonging” will probably grow to the extent that persons indeed feel themselves genuinely “invited to associate” themselves with others with a shared vision and so feel that they are included and valued as members of a “community.” The Brother’s role in all this is the particular gift he brings from the Lasallian heritage and it is one that can help to guide the new Lasallian “community” formed with others around a shared vision to a new place, always open to the future.

The second paragraph of the fourth section of this document outlines how the Brothers are being encouraged to share the Lasallian heritage with others. It would be mutually enriching if Lasallians who are not Brothers were encouraged to try to formulate and share their particular ways of understanding what have been called these key words of “invitation,” “belonging,” “association,” and “community.”

Endnotes

1. This essay emerged out of a continuing formation and education workshop that was conducted by Brother Gerard Rummery, FSC, Brother John Cantwell, FSC, and Brother Jeffrey Calligan, FSC for Lasallian educators of the District of Australia, New Zealand, Pakistan, and Papua New Guinea. The “twenty-seven years” reference in the title alludes to the adoption of the term “shared mission” in the *Rule* by the delegates of the 41st General Chapter (this manuscript was drafted in February 2013). Furthermore, the endnotes found here have been provided to help the reader further explore ideas or texts cited in the essay.

2. Brother Gerard Rummery, FSC earned his doctorate from Lancaster University. He served two periods on the staff of the International Lasallian Center (CIL) in Rome and was twice elected to the General Council of the De La Salle Christian Brothers (1986-1993 and 1993-2000). He is a researcher and longtime international presenter on Lasallian history, pedagogy, and spirituality.

3. Cf. *The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (Rome, 1987).

4. Cf. *The Lasallian Mission of Human and Christian Education: A Shared Mission* by Brother Superior and General Council (Rome, 1997).

5. Cf. *Circular 447: The Documents of the 43rd General Chapter* by Brother Superior and General Council (Rome, 2000).

6. Cf. *Circular 403: The Acts of the 40th General Chapter* by Brother Superior and General Council (Rome, 1976), pages 86-87.

7. Cf. *Lasallian Studies #13: The Lasallian Charism* by the International Council for Lasallian Studies and translated by Aidan Marron, FSC (Rome, 2006), pages 49-180.

8. Cf. *Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life: Perfectae Caritatis* (Vatican, 1965).

9. *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on Consecrated Life: Vita Consecrata* by Pope John Paul II (Vatican, 1996), #54.

10. *Vita Consecrata*, #55.

11. *Vita Consecrata*, #56.

12. *The Lasallian Mission of Human and Christian Education: A Shared Mission* by Brother Superior and General Council (Landover, MD: Christian Brothers Conference, 1997), #3.26 on page 95.

13. Cf. *Lasallian Studies #7: The Institute in the Educational Service of the Poor* by Bruno Alpage, FSC and translated by Allen Geppert, FSC (Rome, 2000).

14. Cf. *Lasallian Studies #11: Introduction to the History of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, 19th–20th Century (1875-1928)* by Henri Bedel, FSC and translated by Allen Geppert, FSC (Rome, 2008), pages 112-123.

15. Cf. “Message from the 41st General Chapter of the Brothers of the Christian Schools to the Members of the ‘Lasallian Family’” in *Circular 422: The 41st General Chapter, Propositions and Messages* by Brother Superior and General Council (Rome, 1986), pages 29-35.