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## Lasallian Mission Formation and Its Contribution to Deeper Association: A Reflection

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### 1. Introduction

Association has existed since the origins of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, but has developed in an altogether unprecedented way during the past forty years . . . After centuries of communal life rooted in stability in the Institute and after decades of renewal in fidelity to our founding charism, we find ourselves now in 2010 living a time of both personal and institutional transition and transformation. These are indeed exciting times . . . times that invite us once again to a faith-filled act of HOPE in our collective future!<sup>2</sup>

These compelling words are found on the first page of *Circular 461: Associated for the Lasallian Mission . . . an act of HOPE*, a document written by the General Council of the Brothers of the Christian Schools and addressed to the "Brothers and All Who Serve the Lasallian Mission." After nearly a half-century of writing and talking about the developing understanding of association as an essential element of Lasallian identity, the General Council, in response to legislation of the 44<sup>th</sup> General Chapter of 2007, consulted writings, conducted a survey, held conversations with many Brothers and Partners, and reflected deeply on the topic. "We believe that the time has come," they continue in the *Circular's* opening paragraphs,

to write to you about what it means in today's world to serve "together and by association" in the Lasallian educational mission of providing a human and Christian education to the young, especially those who are poor.<sup>3</sup>

In this paper, I will reflect on several questions related to Lasallian association for mission. Using recent Institute documents, my own research, my own experience and the experience of my colleagues in the District of San Francisco New Orleans,<sup>4</sup> I will address a number of questions, including the following:

- What is association? When we refer to someone as being "associated for the mission," what do we mean?
- What is a Lasallian Associate "in fact"? I will draw upon Brother Antonio Botana's work related to "de facto association" in reflecting on this question.
- What is "Lasallian mission formation"? I will make reference to *MEL Bulletin 51: Formation for the Lasallian Mission: A Common Frame of Reference*<sup>5</sup> as I respond to this question. *MEL Bulletin 51* describes Lasallian Mission Formation and ten principles of formation in a manner that is very helpful to Lasallian educators and formators at local, District, Regional, and international levels.
- What role does Lasallian mission formation play in assisting a person along their associative journey? In responding to this question, I will discuss a 2011 research study that I conducted in what was then the District of San Francisco.

- What formation opportunities exist for Lasallians in the District of San Francisco of New Orleans? What needs do these formation activities and programs address? What formative needs have not yet been addressed in the District? What formation initiatives are District leadership pursuing in response to these unmet needs?

In reflecting on these questions in the context of my experience in the District of San Francisco New Orleans, I hope that others within the international Lasallian educational community will be inspired and stimulated to reflect on these questions in light of their own experience as individuals, as communities, and as Districts.

## 2. Lasallian Association for Mission: What Is It?

What *is* Lasallian association, in the context of the Lasallian heritage? Addressing this question is precisely the aim of *Circular 461*. Rather than *defining* the term in a few sentences, the General Council chose to *describe* Lasallian association:

In this circular we propose five fundamental elements to describe Lasallian association. Other elements undoubtedly exist, but these five are present both in the Institute’s founding experience and in its ongoing tradition . . . These elements are a rephrasing, for purposes of amplification and clarification, of those found in the Documents of the 43<sup>rd</sup> General Chapter of 2000. . . .<sup>6</sup>

Implied in the descriptions of these five elements of association are some very important formation questions. In order for a person to reach a place in their Lasallian vocational journey at which they feel that they are “associated for mission,” they must participate in experiences and activities of formation. Formation may be experienced in specific *programs* of formation; formation may also be experienced in the *daily interactions with mentors and guides* in one’s local ministry. Allow me to briefly describe each element of association and raise the accompanying questions.

### *Association Exists for the Mission*<sup>7</sup>

“The immediate and ultimate goal of all Lasallian association is our educational mission,” according to *Circular 461*. “There is no point in talking about association unless the discussion focuses on this mission.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, we associate with one another, not because it feels nice to be part of a group, but because we have a job that God has called us to do: the human and Christian education of the young, especially those in poverty.

Some formative questions to ponder: What is a “human and Christian education”? How does one associate with others for the mission if they are not told what the mission is? How is one introduced to the mission in a way that makes sense to them? Who or what assists them to more fully and more deeply understand the Lasallian mission?

### ***Association Implies Being a Member of a Community for the Mission***<sup>9</sup>

Once again, we cite *Circular 461*:

Lasallians, by their very presence in the mission, bring personal and communal life experiences to their service in association. Their own experience of community relationships is a significant part of the vital role they play in the lives of the young.<sup>10</sup>

As one very experienced school leader told me several years ago, “There are no ‘independent contractors’ in Lasallian schools.” It is the community that educates those God has entrusted to the community’s care. Lasallian schools are marked by experiences of welcome, collaboration, teamwork, dialogue, and support.

Some formative questions to ponder: How does one enter into such a community? How does one find their “place” in such a community? How does one discover their unique “contribution” to such a community? How does one begin to learn of the many and varied gifts and talents of the other members of the community? Belonging to such an educational community takes time and involves both receiving from the community and contributing to the community.

### ***Association Results from Experience & Is a Dynamic Journey and Not an Acquired Status***<sup>11</sup>

The authors of *Circular 461* see Lasallian association “as a vocational response to the God who calls . . . It is a progressive conversion.”<sup>12</sup> Association is not static; it is not a “thing” one acquires once and for all. Rather, it is an experience that unfolds like a flower, an experience that deepens over time and that can be understood in retrospect as “one commitment leading to another.” It is a journey that begins in response to a call that may only be dimly understood in the beginning. One’s ongoing response to the call draws one more deeply and more fully into commitment to the Lasallian mission. “Associating with the Lasallian mission,” according to the General Council, “requires integration of the fundamental elements of the Lasallian charism in their personal, community, and professional life.”<sup>13</sup>

Some formative questions to ponder: Who invites someone to begin the journey of Lasallian association? Who accompanies people on their associative journey? Who and what assists Lasallians in their discernment of God’s movement in their lives, in their growing understanding of what it means to belong to a Lasallian educational community? How does one “integrate” the Lasallian charism into their lives? How does a person articulate their commitment to Lasallian education?

### ***Association Stems from Faith, Vocation, and State of Life***<sup>14</sup>

The God who is always and everywhere present calls people to participation in the Lasallian mission. In the words of *Circular 461*,

God calls Lasallians in association for the mission to share in building the Kingdom of God in the manner appropriate to their state of life. Their mission is to be a “Gospel presence” in the world of education.<sup>15</sup>

The call comes to the individual and is experienced in a community setting. “Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God.” One’s state of life – single, married, vowed religious, priest – gives a unique shape and context to how one lives out their Lasallian vocation.

Some formative questions to ponder: What does it mean to be “Lasallian” within the context of life as a committed single person, a married person, a vowed religious, or a priest? Where and to whom does one go with all the questions and challenges that come with life as a Lasallian educator? Who helps one wrestle with the dynamic tension between the needs in the Lasallian school and the needs of one’s family or community?

### ***Association Presupposes a Freely Made Commitment***<sup>16</sup>

“Association also implies a process – a spiritual path that takes one where he or she might never have chosen to go.”<sup>17</sup> John Baptist de La Salle’s experience of a deepening commitment to the human and Christian education of the young, especially those on the margins of society, is one example of what this element of association looks like in practice. De La Salle chose to assist a person who wanted to open a charity school for boys in Rheims in 1679. His decision to assist Adrien Nyel was just that – a specific response to a specific request to open one school. Once that first school opened and proved successful, De La Salle could easily have moved on to other priestly and family responsibilities. However, Nyel and De La Salle received other requests to open other schools. They said “yes” to some requests, “no” to others. Within a few short years, De La Salle’s involvement with the teachers and these schools had deepened and expanded. He was faced with a much larger decision: should he begin giving up some of his other responsibilities so that he could assume leadership of this group of teachers and form a network of teachers and schools? With his decision to do precisely this, his commitment to the teachers and to their enterprise deepened. In time, he committed himself for the rest of his life, along with 12 Brother teachers, to this educational ministry. Sometime following his profession of perpetual vows with these Brothers, De La Salle looked back prayerfully over his years of working with Brothers in schools; and he recognized with wonder how God had led him little by little, step by step, to deeper commitment to the education of youth in need. One commitment led to another.

Some formative questions to ponder: Since those who are just beginning to work in a Lasallian ministry cannot be expected to commit themselves to Lasallian education for an extended period of time, how can we appropriately invite such people into greater responsibility for the Lasallian mission? How can we nurture within them a growing commitment to the Lasallian mission? And what does a meaningful expression of one’s commitment to Lasallian mission look like? Is there more than one way to express our association with one another?

### **3. Lasallian Associates “In Fact”**<sup>18</sup>

. . . the desire of many colleagues in Lasallian ministries to participate in the charism of the Institute is one of the most significant trends in recent times. This longing for charismatic communion and sharing is fostering a dynamic movement in the Institute. The challenge and the opportunity for the Lasallian charism is clear. The challenge is to find ways to *appreciate, acknowledge, and perhaps give form* to this action of the Spirit. The

opportunity is to identify and expand in the future this new and significant presence of the Lasallian charism in the world of the young, especially those in poverty.<sup>19</sup>

Notice the words in italics in the above quote: “*appreciate, acknowledge, and perhaps give form* to this action of the Spirit.” They describe the ongoing challenge of giving expression to the experience of association for Lasallian mission on the part of lay men and women in the Lasallian Family. Brother Antonio Botana, who served from 2000 to 2007 as the Secretary of the International Commission on Association, wrote at length about association. He recognized a great number of lay men and women

who, without having made any official or juridical sign, or an external promise, manifest by their ongoing disposition and their unmistakable acts, that they do in fact participate in this Association.<sup>20</sup>

He referred to these people as “associates ‘in fact,’” or “*de facto* associates.” He identified several characteristics that these people shared:

- a steady disposition of solidarity with other Lasallians and with commitment to the Lasallian mission;
- seeking to be sustained by Lasallian spirituality and seeking meaning from it; an awareness of collaborating in God’s work;
- a clear sense of belonging to the common Lasallian story and to the District; regular participation in District or area meetings, as well as in courses and formation meetings;
- participation in some community experience with other Lasallians;
- an interest in an openness toward the universality of the Lasallian mission.<sup>21</sup>

The District of San Francisco New Orleans, my own home District, has not created a formal process whereby a lay man or a lay woman would become an “associate.” However, on the basis of the characteristics of Lasallian association for mission articulated in *Circular 461* and in Botana’s writings noted above, many Lasallians in the District of San Francisco New Orleans could confidently be considered “associates in fact,” or “*de facto* associates.” What does it mean to these people to be “associated for the Lasallian mission”? Who or what influenced these people in their life journeys to deepen their commitment to the Lasallian educational mission? When they look back on the Lasallian vocational journey, who and what do they identify as important influences on them? These were questions I posed to four “associates in fact” in the then-San Francisco District in a 2011 in-depth interview study.<sup>22</sup> Later in this paper, I will summarize some of my findings, in particular the findings that highlight the role of Lasallian mission formation in leading a person toward the experience of association for Lasallian mission.

#### **4. Lasallian Mission Formation: What Is It?**

Before we can speak coherently about the role of formation in our associative journey, we must define a few terms. When we speak of Lasallian mission formation, what do we mean? In April 2014, the Brothers of the Christian Schools published *MEL Bulletin 51: Formation for the Lasallian Mission: A Common Frame of Reference*. In this publication, they state that

Formation for Lasallian mission is the process of interiorizing the constitutive elements of Lasallian identity. It involves the accompaniment of persons and it helps them fundamentally in their human and spiritual growth and maturation in order to respond to their vocation and to the needs of the mission.<sup>23</sup>

Lasallian mission formation, therefore, involves first introducing men and women in Lasallian ministries to the core beliefs, values, commitments, and practices of the Lasallian heritage. How does such *information* become *formation* to such a degree that it *transforms* people to such an extent that they recognize themselves as being “associated for mission”? One way, as *MEL Bulletin 51* states, is to accompany these people along their way, providing them with opportunities to reflect on their experiences and to put their experiences in dialogue with core Lasallian beliefs, values, commitments, and practices. With time and a good deal of reflection and conversation, study and practice, these core beliefs, values, commitments and practices become increasingly “second nature,” part of “who they are” as persons and as educators.

The authors of *MEL Bulletin 51* suggest ten “principles upon which Lasallian Formation for the Mission” is based.<sup>24</sup> These principles help to give shape to any activity or program of formation created for the benefit of men and women engaged in the Lasallian mission. I would like to highlight only a few of these principles, as I consider them to be of special importance to the formation of men and women for Lasallian mission.

### ***Formation Is for Mission***<sup>25</sup>

*MEL Bulletin 51* states, “Formation and mission are intrinsically connected in such a way that the ideal locus for formation is actually in the carrying out of the mission.”<sup>26</sup> The experience of working in a Lasallian ministry is itself formative. The act of putting core Lasallian beliefs and values into practice in a way that reflects one’s own gifts and talents helps a person come to understand and embrace the core beliefs and values more fully. Experience helps people to understand what Lasallian ideals mean in everyday life.

### ***Formation Is Transformative***<sup>27</sup>

In this formative process, “the development and the experience of formation moves from information to formation, and from formation to transformation and from transformation to integration.”<sup>28</sup> The process begins with an invitation to hear the Lasallian story, to learn about Lasallian education, to learn how Lasallians operate in an educational setting and why. This is the beginning of acculturation, and it is set within a context of welcome and invitation. Experience allows one to see more deeply how these cultural elements of Lasallian education are put into practice, to explore the practical implications of living these cultural elements. Transformation begins to occur as one puts one’s own person, beliefs, values, and experience to work in finding authentic ways to personally practice these elements of Lasallian culture.

### ***Formation Starts with the Individual***<sup>29</sup>

Effective formation recognizes that people come to Lasallian ministries with their own history and experience and values and beliefs, and it invites them to put their own story in dialogue with the

Lasallian story and vision. As teachers and staff begin their service in a Lasallian educational community, they ask themselves questions such as: “Who is the ‘me’ who is joining this Lasallian community?” “What gifts, talents, and experience do I bring to this community?” “What can I learn from the others in this community to strengthen our educational ministry?” The more that people find that their own story resonates with the Lasallian story, the more they feel they belong to the Lasallian Family, and vocation is strengthened.

### *Lasallian Formation Is Integrative*<sup>30</sup>

“Formation is directed toward the integration of the person in relation to oneself, to the Lasallian community, to the larger society, to nature, and to Transcendence.”<sup>31</sup> At first, information *about* the Lasallian mission is seen as an “add-on” – something I am required to do as a new teacher or staff member. With time and experience, it becomes more and more a part of myself, as I reflect on questions such as: “How do I experience this?” “How does this resonate with me?” “How does this make sense to me?” “How do I practice this element of the Lasallian mission?” Effective formation includes time to absorb, to reflect, to question, to make sense of, to incorporate.

“Formation programs foster the commitment of each individual, taking into account each one’s vocation and status in life. Programs also help the person seek a balance among his / her many responsibilities.”<sup>32</sup> Each person’s commitment must reflect one’s own self, one’s vocation, one’s “place” along the vocational journey. Each person’s commitment to Lasallian mission is also experienced within the context of one’s state of life as a single person, as a married person, as a vowed religious, as a priest. *Circular 461* is clear:

We wish to emphasize that participation in the Lasallian Family *must* contribute to the building up of one’s own family and / or community life. It should *never* be seen as a hindrance or as an obstacle to family unity . . . much less put family life “at risk.” Those, whose vocation calls them to marriage, and perhaps to parenthood, are to celebrate the fact that their primary community is their family. Belonging to the Lasallian Family should be a source of strength and balance that nourishes all Lasallian vocations.<sup>33</sup>

Brother Luke Salm, in a paper entitled “The Brothers’ Vow of Association,” stated it this way:

the primary referent and lifestyle for the vowed Brother lies in his association in a religious community; for their lay associates the primary referent remains the family or independent living in the world.<sup>34</sup>

One’s “primary referent” is the “lens” through which one experiences one’s commitment to Lasallian mission and, for many, their association for that mission.

In his *Basis for a Present-Day Model of the Lasallian Family*, Brother Antonio Botana provides a rich description of Lasallian association as an integrative process:

The integration of a person into the stable nucleus of the Lasallian Family comes about, then, by the integration of that person in any of the intentional Lasallian groups or groups associated for the Lasallian mission. This integration is the fruit of a mutual recognition,

one that is sufficiently precise and agreed upon, that is only arrived at following a certain maturation in the process of incorporation. In this process the person gradually assumes the charism or spirit of that family, integrates himself into the entirety of relations, enters in to become part of the story that already is a long narration, with a story line and a plot development that impart unity to the narration, participates in the mission so that he feels it to be his own, is saturated with the spirituality that reveals the sense of the mission, and becomes a disciple of the Founder. In the Lasallian Family this process, guided by the Lasallian charism, is a process of association for the Lasallian mission of education.<sup>35</sup>

### ***Formation Takes Place in Community***<sup>36</sup>

An important element of the Lasallian story and vision is community. It is a community of educators who undertake the call to provide a human and Christian education to the young, especially those in poverty. It is the community of educators who struggle to discern the best ways to address the challenges young people face in their ministries. It is the members of the community of educators who support one another as they all strive to provide an education that is transformative. Thus, it makes sense that Lasallian mission formation should take place in a community setting. The experience of formation, in fact, strengthens and nurtures the community of educators. This formation in a community setting includes the accompaniment of one another in the community. As *MEL Bulletin 51* notes,

This accompaniment takes place in the form of presence, times for personal and communal reflection, personal interviews, spiritual direction, meetings to share and reflect on life and mission, through exchanges and conflict resolution.<sup>37</sup>

### ***Formation Presents the Founding Charismatic Event as a Source of Inspiration and Discernment***<sup>38</sup>

Effective formation assists Lasallians to connect the Founding Story with their contemporary experience. The experience of De La Salle and the first Brothers of God's incremental movement in their lives – inviting them step by step, one decision following another, into deeper commitment to the education of youth – informs the contemporary educator's reflection on God's movement in his or her own life: How did they come to be involved with education in the first place? How did they come to be involved with Lasallian education? How would they describe their Lasallian vocational journey? Reflection on such questions assists contemporary Lasallians to not only feel associated with others today, but also with Lasallians throughout history, even with John Baptist de La Salle.

Studying and reflecting on the commitment of De La Salle and the first Brothers to the educational service of those in poverty assists today's Lasallian educator and today's Lasallian educational community to reflect: "How do I / we provide a transformative education to those in great need in our communities?" "In what concrete ways do we continue the work begun by John Baptist de La Salle and the first Brothers in seventeenth century France?"



## *Formation Is Lifelong*<sup>39</sup>

Just as people enter the Lasallian story and journey somewhere in the middle of their larger life journeys, so their formation in the Lasallian educational mission continues into the future – for some, for the rest of their lives. One should never feel as if one is “finished” with their formation, as if there is no more to learn. Each time we revisit a meditation of De La Salle’s, each time we reflect on the Founding Story and explore ways we contribute to the ongoing Lasallian story today, we do so with more experience, in life as well as in education; and so we have the opportunity to go deeper into the story, to make new connections, to uncover deeper meaning, to explore new responses to God’s call to serve through education. Effective formation in Lasallian mission continually spirals back to important elements of Lasallian culture – including the Founding Story, core beliefs and values, and the like – allowing individuals and communities to uncover more nuanced and deeper connections to the Lasallian educational mission, thereby strengthening both practice and commitment. As *MEL Bulletin 51* states, “contextualized quality formation encourages a constant renewal of our vision of mission.”<sup>40</sup>

### **5. Lasallian Mission Formation: Its Role in the Associative Journey: Reflections on a Recent Research Study**

So what do all these descriptions and principles and values look like in practice? In 2011, I was blessed with the opportunity to spend a great deal of time with two lay men and two lay women in the District of San Francisco, exploring through a series of in-depth interviews their experience of Lasallian association.<sup>41</sup> This study was conducted at a time when many conversations were taking place and many papers were being written about the meaning of Lasallian “association” for Partners – for men and women who were not Brothers but were working with Brothers in Lasallian educational settings. Increasing attention was being paid to this topic in international gatherings of Brothers and Lasallian Partners.<sup>42</sup>

In the study, attention was focused on the experience of Lasallian association on the part of the “study participants.” This mirrored key elements of the Lasallian Founding Story, as De La Salle and the early Brothers developed their system and method of education by paying attention to their experience, by finding God in their experience and in the experience of the young people entrusted to their care. Structures and practices (including the 1691 and 1694 vows of association) were created in response to experience. Thus, it made sense in 2011 to once again listen to experience in an effort to understand more fully what association means for Partners in the Lasallian Family.

Storytelling, the process whereby individuals make meaning of their lived experience, was the methodology for the study. The interview process invited these four Lasallian “associates in fact” to tell the story of their associative journey, beginning with the people and experiences that drew them into association (first interview), continuing with their description of their current experience of association (second interview), and concluding with their needs and hopes as they continue their associative journey into the future (third interview). They were also invited to speak about the associative needs of Lasallian Partners in the District of San Francisco in the future, thus providing important insights into association as it is experienced in one District of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools (third interview).

The study yielded rich reflections that describe association as it is experienced by committed Lasallians on a daily basis. For this section of the paper, I will rely often on the voices of the “study participants” as they describe their experience of association and, in particular, on the ways Lasallian mission formation has enhanced their association. One of the hoped-for outcomes of the study was that it would “help those charged with overseeing programs of Lasallian formation to better understand the lay experience of Lasallian association for mission, which could assist them in the identification of those activities, processes and resources that would be most helpful to Lasallian educators in their vocational journeys.”<sup>43</sup>

As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, it is also hoped that hearing and reflecting on their stories will stimulate the telling and reflecting on the story of other Lasallians in association for mission.

### ***Demographics of Study Participants***

Using the five characteristics of Lasallian association from the 43<sup>rd</sup> General Chapter,<sup>44</sup> a team of three people with District-wide experience (one Brother, one lay man, one lay woman) identified four people from District ministries as “exemplars” of Lasallian association and proposed them as participants in the research study. So, their association for mission was noticeable, easily recognizable to people outside their own local community. While none had made any kind of formal associative commitment (no process of formal association existed at that time in the District, and none exists today in the San Francisco New Orleans District), their commitment was readily apparent. They were recognized as models of Lasallian “associates in fact.”

At the time of the study, the four participants, when considered together, had devoted more than 60 years to direct service in Lasallian ministries. It might be interesting to know that, six years after the completion of the study, all four people continue to be involved directly in Lasallian education – an impressive 84 years of service. If one is looking for evidence of a commitment to Lasallian education as an element of authentic association for mission, 84 years of service is fairly convincing.

While participation in Lasallian mission formation was not one of the criteria for participation in the study, these four Lasallian “associates in fact” had participated in many activities and programs of formation. All four were graduates of the Lasallian Leadership Institute (LLI), a three-year Regional program of intensive formation in Lasallian mission; all had participated in multiple Huether Lasallian Conferences, an annual three-day gathering of Lasallians from throughout the Lasallian Region of North America (RELAN); all four had completed a three-day Lasallian formation program for Board governance; all four had served as delegates to at least two District Mission Assemblies; all four had also served on mission assessment teams for the District’s Catholic Lasallian Assessment Process. All of this is to say that these four Lasallians have steeped themselves in the Lasallian Catholic tradition over many years and have clearly committed themselves to the Lasallian educational mission.

### *Themes Related to Association*

As mentioned earlier, each person participated in three 90-minute in-depth interviews that provided him or her with the opportunity to tell the story of his or her journey of Lasallian association, from beginning to end – if one considers their recommendations for future practices to enhance Lasallian association as the “end.” As noted above, their Lasallian associative journey continues today, as all four “study participants” continue to serve in Lasallian ministries. Analysis of the interview transcripts yielded a number of themes related to formation and its role in the journey of association. Several of these are highlighted below.

#### *The Theme of Formation*

Close attention to the language used by “study participants” reveals the powerful role that mission formation played in their vocational journeys. For example, Alison (a pseudonym, as are the names of the other “study participants”) described her journey as “the windy path of . . . happenstance.” In clarifying her statement, she referred to De La Salle’s own vocational journey: “I definitely remember feeling like ‘this is a great thing to be a part of!’ You know, this guy’s got a legitimate history, and . . . a wonderful story in terms of a step at a time, and . . . how his life evolved into what it became . . . .”<sup>45</sup> She spoke specifically about the role her participation in the Lasallian Leadership Institute (LLI) played in her growing commitment to Lasallian mission. For her, participating in the LLI was

life-changing . . . in terms of my commitment to being part of the Lasallian mission . . . I felt that it invited me into the much wider Lasallian Family . . . It was somewhere in that LLI experience . . . where I was able to really talk about it, integrate it, understand it, confidently be able to use the language and feel like I could be a real representative of this Lasallian mission.<sup>46</sup>

When describing her journey in general terms, Cathy (another “study participant”) described finding herself involved in tasks and activities that she had never anticipated, which she described as “that very Lasallian ‘one commitment leads to another’ process.”<sup>47</sup> But later, she spoke very specifically about a session during the first year of the LLI, when De La Salle’s story resonated with the contemporary Lasallian story, inclusive of not only her experience but also the experience of others:

. . . when we did the follow-up at LLI and did that “one commitment led to another” and looked at De La Salle, I thought, “Oh, I have some of that too. Isn’t that interesting? And we sat around at table discussion, and all of us could resonate with that piece of the story. “I didn’t even know about this school,” or “I didn’t know who the Brothers were,” or “Somebody invited me, and I said ‘yes,’ and that led to this, and now here I am in a formation program.” All of us had a similar – we all had different stories, but we all resonated with that piece of De La Salle’s story, which is interesting.<sup>48</sup>

At another point, Cathy returned to the profound influence of the LLI:

It was an understanding of De La Salle and his story, but then looking at our own story and how that's reflected in our work and how that's very much what it means to be a Lasallian educator . . . So that understanding, and that in-depth look at De La Salle and his life was huge for me.<sup>49</sup>

David (another "study participant") connected his experience of Lasallian mission directly to the experience of De La Salle and the early Brothers:

I think De La Salle's vision to provide a quality education to the sons of the working poor of his time was rooted in the same belief that kids are kids and they deserve the chance to be kids and it doesn't matter who their parents are or where they live or what their background is. I feel invigorated by the privilege of doing our part here to continue that rich legacy and tradition.<sup>50</sup>

Ben (another "study participant") spoke of his LLI experience as a powerful aid in his understanding of his place in the Lasallian Family. For several years, he had been involved with Lasallian ministries, both as a student and as an adult. He was seriously committed to working with young people in faith-based ministries, and it wasn't until he participated in the LLI that he recognized and consciously embraced his commitment to Lasallian education:

All of a sudden, I'm provided with context that I've never had before . . . That's one of the things that the Brothers and the mission give us is context for the decisions that we make<sup>51</sup>

### *The Theme of Accompaniment*<sup>52</sup>

Each "study participant" told stories of many individuals who had walked with them along their journey and who had invited them into deeper involvement with the Lasallian mission. They gave these "mentors" credit for making it possible to engage more deeply in Lasallian education, resulting in a deepened commitment – an associative commitment – to the mission. David stated that these "incredible mentors . . . continued to convince me more and more of how right it was that I was here and that I was lucky enough to be a part of it."<sup>53</sup> He also mentioned that his mentors also sparked his own interest in more intensive formation:

I owe a tremendous amount to those individuals because of how transformative those experiences have been . . . [Participating in formation experiences] created a desire in me, a real hunger in me, energy around wanting to know more, wanting to learn more, wanting to be exposed to more.<sup>54</sup>

Cathy described her mentors with these words:

They are in different places and know me in different lenses, but they know who I am and what my hopes are and they will walk through that with me. Some of them are Brothers, some of them are lay Partners, some of them are family . . . all of them are friends.<sup>55</sup>

Alison stated it simply: “People see something in you.”<sup>56</sup> These people said “yes” to the invitation to formation and to deeper involvement in the Lasallian mission because they trusted the judgment and integrity of those who invited them. Many years later, they viewed the invitations as critical moments in their journeys, reinforcing the powerful formative role that relationships play in the Lasallian Family.

### *The Theme of Community*

Cathy served for two years as a Lasallian Volunteer and lived in a community with Brothers. She spoke of the difficulties and challenges she encountered during her time as a Volunteer, and she credited the Brothers’ community with helping her through the experience:

... I would never have survived without the community support and the prayer life that we had there and all the discussions that were constantly going on – formal and informal, during prayer, during meals, and then the support from the school staff itself – it was like “teacher boot camp,” but then it was also kind of like “Lasallian boot camp,” too – defining yourself as an educator, and knowing that you have to have that community support and that faith element in your work.<sup>57</sup>

Cathy appreciated the diversity of her LLI group, allowing her to get to know Lasallian educators “from schools you had never heard of”<sup>58</sup> and building community “with Brothers and Partners and people from all over the West Coast and then also from schools outside of our District.”<sup>59</sup> Ben recognized and applauded the same in his own LLI group, and he described Lasallian education as “a network of schools, a sense of interdependence”<sup>60</sup> that he experienced personally through relationships developed over his many years of service to the Lasallian mission.

### *The Theme of Vocation*

These four “study participants” spoke eloquently of their vocation as Lasallian educators as they described their current experience of Lasallian education. Alison stated, “In my journey to Lasallian education it became quickly evident that that was the place where I was going to find, where I had found, a home.”<sup>61</sup> In her own way, Cathy echoed Alison’s experience: “I feel called to be here, to be part of this – this Lasallian Family, this mission, this educational ministry. That’s who I am.”

## **6. Lasallian Mission Formation: Needs and Responses**

### *A Final Word from Our Study Participants*

The third interview in the research study discussed above<sup>62</sup> asked “study participants” to look to the future and share what was needed in the then-District of San Francisco (now the District of San Francisco New Orleans) so that the association of Brothers and Lasallian Partners would remain strong. They all spoke at length about the need for ongoing formation. I will let their words speak for themselves. First, Cathy:

I am associated because I have been formed and am forming . . . you need those B-12 shots [her description of formation activities and programs], and you need to sit with somebody and pray with them and talk about it and unpack stuff. You have to do it. I think, especially [since] we have so many more people in this Lasallian mission who don't live together in community, we have to provide opportunities to do that for our association to be strong . . . We have to make time and space for that to happen everywhere – it needs to happen at schools, it needs to happen at the District level, at the Regional level, at the Institute level . . . So, I can't disconnect formation and association.<sup>63</sup>

Alison explained that activities and programs of formation gave Lasallian Partners the language and understanding necessary to clearly enunciate the Lasallian mission and their place in the mission. She advocated for “a lot of continuing formation and education and opportunities available and built into school schedules for adults to experience association.”<sup>64</sup> In particular, she advocated for the formation of future leaders of Lasallian ministries:

I do think we need to continue to be deliberate about inviting people in, affirming talents, continuing things like “Discerning Leaders” [a two-year District discernment program for potential school leaders] and LLI and the formation programs that really give people insight in the larger Lasallian Family and association. I think invitation and personal contact is . . . extremely important.<sup>65</sup>

Ben envisioned Lasallians so well formed that, when life circumstances required them to leave his school, they would seek employment in another Lasallian ministry: “When I lose people here, when I lose really committed Lasallian educators, I expect to lose them to other Lasallian schools.”<sup>66</sup> Reading between the lines of Ben's statement, one can hear an appreciation for the larger Lasallian Family – losing someone to another Lasallian ministry is really not losing them at all. They remain part of the family.

Finally, David recognized the financial costs of providing quality formation programs, but still advocated for a deep commitment to formation:

. . . how can we put a stake in the ground and really maintain our commitment to the importance of formation and the importance of looking toward future leadership at the Board level, within our schools, and within our other ministries? I think it may require us to be even more collaborative across schools than we have been and perhaps focus more on regional [meaning ministries in close geographic proximity to one another] activities and collaboration than District-wide.<sup>67</sup>

### ***Current Activities and Programs of Lasallian Mission Formation***

For a number of years, the Office of Education of the District of San Francisco New Orleans has provided a number of formation opportunities for teachers and staff members and administrators in our District ministries. An orientation to Lasallian mission is provided at the beginning of each year at each District ministry for newly hired teachers, staff members, and administrators. This orientation is an initial invitation and welcome to the Lasallian mission. Several elements of Lasallian culture are discussed during the orientation, including Lasallian terminology, the

Founding Story, Lasallian practices, Lasallian geography and demographics, and five core beliefs and values that inform Lasallian educational practice.<sup>68</sup> The orientation intentionally takes place before the beginning of the school year so that new employees have an idea of expectations and beliefs and practices of Lasallian schools, thus informing their own practice as well as facilitating their entry into the local educational community as well as the worldwide Lasallian Family. In the middle of the school year, these same people gather for an after-school retreat that provides time, space, and structure in order to facilitate reflection on their initial experience of Lasallian education. The retreat consists of five meditations, each focusing on a core Lasallian value. The goal of these two formative activities in the first year of one's service in a Lasallian school is to provide a common introduction to Lasallian mission and culture and a common foundation on which Brothers and Partners can build as they deepen their participation in the Lasallian Family. A number of District schools also offer ongoing accompaniment of their new teachers and staff through meetings, class visits, one-on-one discussions, etc.

In addition to the common mission orientation, the District Office of Education offers a variety of programs that draw people together from the various District works: annual meetings of campus ministers and student activities coordinators; two-to-three day "job-alike" gatherings (for groups such as academic departments, assistant principals, counselors, and the like); week-long assemblies for students from District schools; regular chief administrator meetings; regular meetings of school vocation coordinators; annual student vocation retreats; etc. The District Office of Education also encourages schools to identify and invite participants to Regional, in-depth formation programs annually, and accompanies these people throughout their formative experience.

### ***District Formation Needs in the Near Future***

With all the good that is being accomplished at the present time in the District of San Francisco New Orleans, more is needed. In recent years, many international gatherings of Brothers and Partners, including the 44<sup>th</sup> General Chapter,<sup>69</sup> the 45<sup>th</sup> General Chapter,<sup>70</sup> the 2006 International Mission Assembly,<sup>71</sup> the 2013 International Mission Assembly,<sup>72</sup> the 2013 International Young Brothers Assembly,<sup>73</sup> and the 2014 International Young Lasallians Symposium<sup>74</sup> have identified a number of formation needs. In particular, many groups have identified the need to expand the reach of Lasallian mission formation efforts to include *all* teachers and staff members in Lasallian ministries.

Addressing this need raises several particular issues. This final section of the paper articulates some of these issues and reflects on them in light of our experience in the District of San Francisco New Orleans. As with earlier sections of this paper, you are invited to let the reflection that follows stimulate your own reflection in the context of your own local and District experience.

### ***The Importance of Consultation and Careful Listening***

First, thinking about providing mission formation that involves most or all teachers and staff in Lasallian ministries raises some important, basic questions. What formation, beyond an initial mission orientation, do all teachers and staff need? What topics require more attention or perhaps deeper explanation? What is the minimal level of formation in the Lasallian mission is necessary

for most people to successfully fulfill their job responsibilities in a local ministry? What formation activities (such as annual retreats, regular prayer and reflection at staff meetings, ongoing accompaniment, and the like) are already being provided by local leadership? What keeps some teachers and staff from participating in either formation or other activities that already exist in the District? Such questions and others must be explored in dialogue with local ministry leaders before embarking on the design and implementation of new formation activities and programs. In fact, ongoing consultation and careful listening to local leaders and to teachers and staff will be important throughout the process of design and implementation.

### ***Joint Formation of Brothers and Lasallian Partners***

Second, I often have heard it said that Brothers and Partners should experience Lasallian mission formation together. I agree completely with this suggestion. My agreement, however, does not deny the importance and the place of the specific programs and activities of initial and ongoing formation in which Brothers participate as members of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. This Brother-specific formation can and will continue. In recent years in RELAN, we have seen some Partners join the team of facilitators and presenters for some Brother-specific formation, which is a very healthy development. Partners can provide an added perspective, based on their experience, of the Lasallian vocation and the commitment to the human and Christian education of the young, especially those poverty. For young men in initial Brothers' formation, seeing effective collaboration between Brothers and Partners in the facilitation of formation is a powerful indicator of how deeply the Lasallian mission is shared between Brothers and Partners.

Having said all that, involving Brothers and Partners together in a variety of mission formation activities and programs at the local, District, and Regional levels has several important advantages. First, relationships are made and nurtured through the shared experience of formation. Brothers and Partners get to know one another as stories of vocational journeys are shared, as common challenges are discussed, as questions are raised and reflected upon, as prayer is shared. Building relationships through such experiences is the first step in building community at the local, District, Regional, and international levels. As noted earlier in the discussion of research, the experience of building relationships across ministries and across Districts has a powerful effect on strengthening association for mission. As we are increasingly share responsibility for the Lasallian mission, we need to be engaging in mission-related discussions and mission-focused decision-making at all levels. Joint formation experiences help to build the quality of relationships that allow for healthy, honest dialogue on difficult topics related to the Lasallian educational mission.

### ***Forming the Formators***

In the tenth chapter of his *Letter to the Romans*, Saint Paul states that

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?<sup>75</sup>



In his first *Meditation for the Time of Retreat*, John Baptist de La Salle refers to this passage from Romans when he states that God wants

all of us to come to the knowledge of the truth . . . This is why God wills all people to be instructed, so that their minds may be enlightened by the light of faith. We cannot be instructed in the mysteries of our holy religion unless we have the good fortune to hear about them, and we cannot have this advantage unless someone preaches the Word of God . . . This is what God does by diffusing the fragrance of his teaching throughout the whole world by human ministers.<sup>76</sup>

The words of Saint Paul and the words of De La Salle apply as well to the challenge of providing Lasallian mission for all. Formation for mission helps people better understand, embrace, and commit to the Lasallian mission. But how can people be committed to the mission, if they do not know the mission? How can they know the mission if they do not have someone to tell them about the mission? How can they have someone share the Lasallian story and vision with them if no one has been prepared to share the story? These questions identify and name a significant challenge in responding to the need for formation for all: we need more formators! Addressing this need has been identified as a priority at many recent Institute gatherings.<sup>77</sup> Just as we have come to learn how to prepare people to be competent, effective teachers, we must begin to learn how to prepare Lasallians to be competent, effective formators. It is time to design and implement formation programs for those Lasallians who wish to participate in the formation of their colleagues at local, District, and Regional levels. Just as handing a textbook to a person and commanding them to “go teach them” is not adequate preparation for teaching, creating and making available formation resources is not enough to assure that quality, effective Lasallian mission formation will be available for all men and women in local Lasallian works.

### ***Who is Responsible?***

If we agree that formation for all is a priority in the Lasallian Family, then how do we make this happen? It will require the hard work and the goodwill of many people at multiple levels.

First, at the local level, ministry leaders must make mission formation for their staff a priority. This means allocating time in the schedule for formation experiences. It also means sending people to District and Regional formation programs. It also means empowering people in the local community to design and facilitate formation activities that will take place locally. This may require some release time from other activities and / or time spent in future programs of formation for formators. Additionally, this means allocating the necessary financial resources to cover the cost of such programs and to send local people to participate in available District and Regional formation programs.

Second, at the District level, District leaders must make mission formation at the local level a priority. This means collaborating closely with local leaders to discern the content and design of formation resources and activities that would be most appropriate for local Lasallians. It also means creating activities and programs of formation for formators and making such activities and programs accessible to those identified as potential formators; and this means working with local

leaders to identify those Lasallians at the local level who have had the necessary formation and have the requisite skills and dispositions to be good formators for their colleagues.

Third, at the Regional level, it would be advisable, where possible, for Regional leaders to gather together District formation personnel to begin visioning and creating and implementing “forming the formator” programs for new formators across the Region. Such a plan, where feasible, might be a more cost-effective way, from the Region all the way down to the local ministry, to ultimately provide what is needed for Lasallians across the Lasallian Family to participate in the mission formation needed to strengthen their own identity as Lasallians and their commitment to the Lasallian educational mission.

## **7. Conclusion**

We commit ourselves to assure the life and vitality of the charism as a gift of the Spirit in the way John Baptist de La Salle and the first Brothers responded to God’s call. We Lasallians are aware that the vitality and viability of our charism is the result of our faithful commitment, a commitment that is strengthened by formation and accompaniment.<sup>78</sup>

This statement from the De La Salle Brothers’ most recent General Chapter accurately describes both Lasallian formation and Lasallian association for mission as responses to the need of assuring “the life and vitality” of the Lasallian educational mission into the future. The need is urgent and ongoing. The local, District, Regional, and international work of formation for association and for mission has borne tremendous fruit in recent years, as the number of Lasallian ministries worldwide continues to grow, the number of people served by Lasallian ministries continues to grow, and as the number of people serving in Lasallian ministries continues to grow. However, now is not the time to rest on our success. As large numbers of well-formed and deeply committed Lasallians age and retire, we must assure that other well-formed and deeply-committed Lasallians are ready to step into their shoes and continue the struggle to “provide a human and Christian education to the young, especially the poor, according to the ministry which the Church has entrusted to it.”<sup>79</sup> As we renew and redouble our efforts, let us do so in the spirit of faith, trusting in the presence and power of God, who has called us to this ministry.

Live Jesus in our hearts forever!

## **Endnotes**

1. Gregory Kopra, who earned his doctorate in education at the University of San Francisco, is the Director, Formation for Mission, for the District of San Francisco New Orleans. This paper was written for and presented at the seminar, “Reflecting on Lasallian Formation for Today and the Future: Toward the *Declaration on Lasallian Education*,” which took place at Casa Generalizia in Rome, May 22-26, 2017.

2. *Circular 461: Associated for the Lasallian Mission . . . an act of HOPE* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2010), pages 5-6.

3. *Circular 461*, I.3, page 6.
4. The District of San Francisco New Orleans came into being on July 1, 2014, after years of discussions between the then Districts of New Orleans-Santa Fe and of San Francisco. It is a part of the Lasallian Region of North America (RELAN).
5. *MEL Bulletin 51: Formation for the Lasallian Mission: A Common Frame of Reference* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2014).
6. *Circular 461*, 2.1, page 23. Referencing *Circular 447: The Documents of the 43<sup>rd</sup> General Chapter* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2000).
7. First Element.
8. *Circular 461*, 2.2.1, page 24.
9. Second Element.
10. *Circular 461*, 2.3.1, pages 25-26.
11. Third Element.
12. *Circular 461*, 2.4.1, page 26.
13. *Circular 461*, 2.4.7, page 27.
14. Fourth Element.
15. *Circular 461*, 2.5.1, page 28.
16. Fifth Element.
17. *Circular 461*, 2.6.1, page 28.
18. Brother Antonio Botana, FSC.
19. *Circular 461*, 3.11, page 35 (italics added for emphasis).
20. Antonio Botana, FSC, *Thematic Vocabulary of Lasallian Association*, Lasallian Essays 3 (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2008), page 36.
21. Botana, *Thematic Vocabulary of Lasallian Association*, page 36.
22. Gregory T. Kopra, "The Experience of Lasallian Association on the Part of Lay 'Associates in Fact' in the District of San Francisco," EdD dissertation (University of San Francisco, 2012).
23. *MEL Bulletin 51*, 3.1, page 7.

24. The ten principles as listed on page 9 of *MEL Bulletin 51* are the following: (1) formation is for mission; (2) formation is transformative; (3) formation promotes association for mission; (4) formation responds to local and global needs; (5) formation starts with the individual; (6) formation is integrative; (7) formation takes place in community; (8) formation develops a particular spirituality; (9) formation presents the founding charismatic event as a source of inspiration and discernment; and (10) formation is lifelong.

25. Principle #1.

26. *MEL Bulletin 51*, 5.1.2), page 9.

27. Principle #2.

28. *MEL Bulletin 51*, 5.2.1, page 10.

29. Principle #5.

30. Principle #6.

31. *MEL Bulletin 51*, 5.6.1, page 12.

32. *MEL Bulletin 51*, 5.6.3, page 12.

33. *Circular 461*, 5.22, page 56.

34. Luke Salm, FSC, “The Brother’s Vow of Association” (unpublished manuscript of a paper delivered to *Lasallians of Great Britain and Malta* in January 2006), page 8.

35. Antonio Botana, FSC, *Basis for a Present-Day Model of the Lasallian Family*, Lasallian Essays 4 (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2008), 3.2, page 70.

36. Principle #7.

37. *MEL Bulletin 51*, 5.7.3, page 13.

38. Principle #9.

39. Principle #10.

40. *MEL Bulletin 51*, 5.10.1, page 14.

41. Kopro.

42. Cf. *Circular 447: The Documents of the 43<sup>rd</sup> General Chapter* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2000); *Report of the International Assembly 2006: Associated for the Lasallian Educational Mission* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2006); and *Circular 455: The Documents of the 44<sup>th</sup> General Chapter* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2007).

43. Kopro, page 18.

44. *Circular 447*, page 4.
45. Kopra, page 115.
46. Kopra, page 122.
47. Kopra, page 116.
48. Kopra, page 142.
49. Kopra, pages 121-122.
50. Kopra, page 117.
51. Kopra, page 118.
52. Accompaniment (mentoring and invitation).
53. Kopra, page 126.
54. Kopra, page 129.
55. Kopra, page 127.
56. Kopra, page 130.
57. Kopra, pages 124-125.
58. Kopra, page 135.
59. Kopra, page 135.
60. Kopra, page 135.
61. Kopra, page 153.
62. Kopra.
63. Kopra, page 202.
64. Kopra, page 203.
65. Kopra, page 205.
66. Kopra, page 203.
67. Kopra, page 204.

68. For more about these five core beliefs and practices, see “Reflections on Five Core Principles That Help Guide Lasallian Education” by Gregory Kopra in *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian*

*Higher Education* 11 (2), pages 15-27; and “The Five Core Principles of Lasallian Schools: Their Origins, Integration with Catholic Identity, and Resonance Today” by George Van Grieken FSC in *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 10 (1), pages 21-39.

69. *Circular 455: The Documents of the 44<sup>th</sup> General Chapter* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2007).

70. *Circular 469: The Documents of the 45<sup>th</sup> General Chapter: “This Work of God Is Also Our Work”* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2014).

71. *Report of the International Assembly 2006: Associated for the Lasallian Educational Mission* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2006).

72. *Report of the International Assembly 2013: One Family, One Mission: Lasallians Associated for the Educational Service of the Poor* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2013).

73. “International Young Brothers Assembly 2013: Report to the 45<sup>th</sup> General Chapter” (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2013).

74. “Third International Symposium of Young Lasallians: Final Reports and Outcomes” (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2014).

75. *Romans* 10:13-15a (NRSV).

76. *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*, translated by Richard Arandez FSC and edited by Augustine Loes FSC and Francis Huether FSC (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1994), #193.1, pages 432-433.

77. Cf. *Report of the International Assembly 2006: Associated for the Lasallian Educational Mission* (2006); *Report of the International Assembly 2013: One Family, One Mission* (2013); “International Young Brothers Assembly 2013: Report to the 45<sup>th</sup> General Chapter” (2013); *Circular 469: The Documents of the 45<sup>th</sup> General Chapter* (2014); and “Third International Symposium of Young Lasallians: Final Reports and Outcomes” (2014).

78. *Report of the International Assembly 2013: One Family, One Mission* (2013), challenge 1.2; and *Circular 469: The Documents of the 45<sup>th</sup> General Chapter* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2014), 5.3, page 36.

79. *The Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools* (Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2015), article 3.