Nowakowski, Matt J. "Where Do We Go from Here? The 2024 Lasallian Research Seminar on Association for Mission." *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education 16*, no. 2 (Christian Brothers Conference: 2025).

Where Do We Go from Here? The 2024 Lasallian Research Seminar on Association for Mission[1]

Matt J. Nowakowski, Ed.D.[2]

Introduction

From October 28 to November 1, 2024, fifty participants from across the global Lasallian family met at the Generalate in Rome, Italy, for the 2024 Lasallian Research Seminar on Association for Mission: Its Development for the Future. Staff, faculty, administrators, and researchers from Europe, South America, Africa, North America, and Asia engaged in substantive lectures, discussion, and reflection on the development, meaning, and future of association for mission within the Institute. Prior to the start of the seminar, participants read "From the Vows to the Community: Living the Lasallian Heritage Today," a working paper by Brother Pedro Maria Gil Larrañaga. Thought-provoking lectures were provided by Brother Pedro, from District of ARLEP (Spain and Portugal) as principal author and researcher, Ms. Heather Ruple Gilson, Coordinator of Lasallian Vocation for the District of Ireland, Great Britain, and Malta, and Brother Santiago Rodriquez Mancini, Director General—Director of the Lasallian Heritage and Research Office. The lectures were augmented by small group discussions stratified into Spanish, English, and French language groups and large group reporting. Participants also shared morning prayer, mass, meals, and social networking over the course of the week.

An overarching theme of the week, best expressed by Brother Pedro, was that association for mission must reflect lived spiritual dimensions—consecration, mission, and community—rather than a secular deconstruction of association to isolated elements or localized definitions.[3] To build association for mission, Brother Pedro offered three interconnected steps: educational fruitfulness, commitment to community, and making God present, that is, recognizing divine presence as the source of creativity and unity.[4] Throughout the week, participants discussed both theory and practice to support the evolution of Lasallian association. It is the aim of this paper is to present four meta-themes encountered during our week of shared study and participatory dialogue: building communities for mission, institutional evolution and transition, inclusivity, and faith in God's plan. Key concepts from lecture discussions will be presented, as well as supporting statements from each language group's report.

Building Communities for Mission

The seminar studied the Lasallian community as the foundation of its educational mission, and from this foundation in community the importance of association is understood. Saint John Baptist de La Salle focused on building communities to support existing schools, not founding schools themselves. Brother Pedro outlined a four-stage evolution of the Lasallian movement: from work groups focused on tasks, to communities engaging the whole person, to a society of

interconnected communities, and finally to a formal institution.[5] This progression highlights the importance of relational bonds, shared identity, and structured support. The shift in meaning of "association" over time reflects the dynamic nature of Lasallian identity and its ongoing adaptation to meet educational and spiritual needs. The speaker emphasizes the commitment of the early Lasallians to living and working "together and by association," a testament to their understanding of the strength derived from interconnectedness.[6]

The seminar also focused on the history of the Brothers of the Christian Schools from the time of the death of Saint John Baptist de La Salle to the present, focusing on the Institute's institutionalization. It highlights tensions between relying on providence versus seeking formal recognition through royal and papal approval. De La Salle's full commitment to community life shaped his vision of shared leadership and gradual vows.[7] The evolving identity of the Brothers was influenced by both internal debates and external pressures. A recurring theme discovered is the balance between religious vocation and educational mission, especially in navigating mission versus employment.

Brother Pedro presented a compelling vision for renewing the Lasallian mission through community, vocation, and association. He emphasized that Lasallian identity is rooted in relationships, not structures, and called for a shift in mentality to embrace the "discourse of association."[8] Education, he argued, is sacramental, relationships being the key component. He distinguished between the "ministry of animation" (practical leadership) and the "ministry of the sign" (spiritual witness), both essential to Lasallian life. Brother Pedro urged that communities be expansive and welcoming frontiers—open and engaged—rather than limited and restrictive boundaries, and that they discern new ways of living the charism in a changing, postmodern world.[9]

During the language group reporting, the French group report emphasized that Lasallian association must be a lived experience rooted in a shared vocation and sense of belonging, rather than a rigid organizational structure. Formation is seen as a journey of accompaniment, guiding individuals toward deeper engagement with the mission. The English group concurred, stressing collaborative platforms and regional efforts to share resources. Ultimately, these two groups called for a radical, mission-centered approach that prioritizes the Lasallian charism over structural constraints. The Spanish language group stressed collaboration and teamwork as essential, replacing individualistic approaches with shared responsibility. Concerns were raised about sustainability when key leaders leave, highlighting the importance of effective formation programs rooted in lived experience.

Institutional Evolution and Transition

Brother Santiago traced the institutional evolution of Lasallian association, showing how the Brothers' decisions after De La Salle's death changed with the maturation of the Institute. Historical data suggests that the practical needs of the Institute and changing Church views on

religious life led to formal vows and a more structured organization. Brother Santiago highlighted the influence of Father Nicholas Barré, founder of the Sisters of the Infant Jesus, whose loosely organized teaching community inspired De La Salle's involvement.[10] De La Salle's emphasis on human agency and organization contrasted with Barré's reliance on providence. Brother Santiago stressed the importance of adapting Lasallian identity to modern challenges while remaining rooted in its founding spirit of faith and zeal.[11]

Brother Santiago also examined the transformation of Lasallian identity, beginning with De La Salle's shift from serving as an external authority to becoming an engaged active community member after teachers voiced concerns about their practical and financial insecurity. In time, De La Salle promoted a participatory model, encouraging Brothers' participation in creating the evolution of the institute.[12] De La Salle and the Brothers introduced vows and structured themselves more like the established religious congregations of the day, diverging from De La Salle's original vision. Brother Santiago highlighted internal tensions—mission versus employment, spirit versus spirituality—and emphasized the Institute's ongoing "re-foundations." Brother Santiago called for continual adaptation rooted in faith and zeal to meet evolving educational and spiritual challenges.[13]

Brother Pedro further explored the historical evolution of religious brotherhood within the Lasallian Institute, focusing on ideological and structural shifts from the early to late twentieth century.[14] He highlighted the crisis and restoration efforts of the early 1900s, the transformative influence of Vatican II, and the innovative spirit of the Taizé Community. Key General Chapters in 1966, 1976, and 1986 marked turning points, especially the "The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today: A Declaration," published in 1967, which "redefined" Brothers as signs of God's presence and emphasized collaboration with laypeople.[15] Drawing on primary sources, Brother Pedro underscored the complex interplay of theology, internal debate, and external pressures.

Ms. Heather Ruple Gilson highlighted the need for creative synthesis and ongoing renewal of the Institute's understanding of association.[16] The Institute's history is marked by continual "refoundation," with Vatican II playing a crucial role in the continued transformation of the understanding of association by fostering a spirit of openness and change within the church.[17] The 1986 and 1993 General Chapters introduced the transformative concept of "shared mission" and lay involvement. This term presented a new way of understanding the mission, and it sparked lasting change. The idea of shared mission calls on Brothers and lay partners to embrace collaboration and dynamic balance as they carry the Lasallian mission forward into the twenty-first century. It is for the current members of the Lasallian family to explore global Lasallian association, emphasizing universal openness beyond local contexts.[18]

Ms. Ruple Gilson affirmed diverse models of association, shaped by local realities, and stressed the importance of relationships, prayer, and shared joy.[19] She stated that there exists a need for honest dialogue to address fears and urged movement beyond experimentation toward

sustainable structures. She emphasized the urgency of action amid mission fragility and re-centered association around the mission itself. Ultimately, she expressed hope, trusting the Holy Spirit and the Lasallian family's evolving path.

During the language group reporting, the Spanish language group advocated for integrated decision-making, formation for leaders, and adapting existing structures to support ongoing change and development of association. It stressed experience-based formation, openness to transcendence, and walking alongside Brothers in equality. Flexibility, synodality, and respecting individual paces are key themes, along with the need for better resource sharing, visibility, and intentionality in forming young people. The English-speaking group reported shared governance models to balance roles between Brothers and lay partners and suggested adapting mentoring practices to help in the transformation of association within the Institute. Finally, the French language group stressed the need for a renewed commitment to openness, flexibility, and spiritual depth for the long-term vitality of Lasallian association.

Inclusivity

Brother Pedro again highlighted the General Chapter of 1966 as a turning point in the Lasallian Institute's history, marked by internal conflict and Vatican intervention. In 1967 the Chapter produced the transformative "The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today: A Declaration," affirming the Brother's identity as a sign of God's presence and promoting collaboration with laypeople. Later General Chapters in 1976 and 1986 introduced the concept of "dimensions," consecration, mission, and community in religious life and grappled with the complexities of "shared mission," revealing tensions between tradition and evolving roles.[20]

Brother Pedro's analysis of the Chapter of 1976 reveals a moment of tension and contradiction within the Institute. A commission's proposal for lay association was rejected, yet the Chapter simultaneously welcomed the consecration of "Signum Fidei" members, lay individuals formally "incorporated" into the brotherhood. This paradox, if not contradiction, was described by some as a form of "clericalism," reflected the Institute's struggle to reconcile greater inclusion with a tradition nearly three centuries long. The Chapter of 1986 marked a major shift, restructuring the Rule around the inseparable "dimensions" of consecration, mission, and community. The phrase "shared mission," became a lasting concept, capturing the evolving collaboration between Brothers and lay partners.[21]

Ms. Ruple Gilson described the growing and vital role of women in the Lasallian family. Heather emphasized women's increasing leadership and mutual support of their vocations.[22] She suggested that association be defined and understood as a shared journey of belonging to each other and to the mission. The 2015 Rule marked a pivotal shift, with Brothers sharing the role of heart, memory, and guarantor of the mission with partners. Heather suggested that the Lasallian family move beyond experimentation and build sustainable structures for association.[23] She emphasized the urgency of action amid the mission's fragility and critiqued the resistance to

change, affirming the Holy Spirit's active presence. Key calls to action include embracing diverse vocations, inclusivity, and synodality, as highlighted by the Church and the 46th General Chapter.[24]

Brother Pedro presented three interconnected steps to build Lasallian association: (1) educational fruitfulness, fostering creativity and professional fulfillment; (2) commitment to community, encouraging shared responsibility, reflection, and prayer; and (3) making God present, recognizing divine presence as the source of creativity and unity.[25] He stressed these steps must be pursued simultaneously for balance. Practical strategies include forming small communities, focusing on local contexts, and promoting dialogue.[26]Addressing the evolving role of Brothers, he called for a respectful "re-founding" of the Lasallian mission.

The English-speaking group suggested a need for creating a more inclusive and equitable Lasallian association, especially by addressing the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles despite being the majority of lay partners. The Spanish-speaking group emphasized care as central to Lasallian association, including self-care and environmental responsibility, while the French-speaking group suggested that challenges to inclusion and sustainability to be addressed must include maintaining stability, ensuring continuity despite personnel changes, and attracting new members to the Institute.

Faith in God's Plan

Brother Pedro highlighted faith in God's plan, as expressed in De La Salle's *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*, as the true driving force behind Lasallian commitment.[27] Well-known Lasallian constructs, including service to the poor and modeling Jesus's compassion, were discussed as cornerstones of the Lasallian movement. The concept of "fraternity" captures the essence of Lasallian identity; indeed, faith in our fraternity is key to association. Brother Pedro warned against conflating local community with broader association, urging deeper reflection on their distinct roles.[28] He urged Lasallians to contemplate these ideas and consider how they can contribute to the enduring vitality of the Lasallian mission by nurturing robust communities grounded in faith and service to the poor.

Brother Santiago explored synodality as both a right rooted in baptism and a method for renewing the Church amid growing deinstitutionalizations.[29] He emphasized that synodality is not a new initiative but a return to the inclusive, dialogical practices of the early Church, as seen in the Acts of the Apostles. Drawing from his experience in Pope Francis's recent synod, where lay voting was introduced, he highlighted the importance of spiritual conversation, prayer, and shared experiences.[30] Synodality, he explained, involves active listening, openness to dissent, and resisting rigid categories or predetermined outcomes. Inspired by *Laudato Si'*, he outlined a process of diagnosis, indignation, and repentance before applying technical solutions, always guided by ethical and spiritual discernment.[31] He introduced "consensus by overflow," where decisions aim for the greater good rather than minimal agreement. Authority in a synodal Church

must foster participation, unity, transparency, and fidelity to Church teachings. Ultimately, synodality is an ongoing journey, not a one-time event, requiring courage, faith, and trust in the Holy Spirit's guidance. Brother Santiago called the Church to embrace this path to remain meaningful and inclusive in today's world.[32]

Brother Pedro emphasized unity as the foundation of Lasallian identity, warning that without it, diversity becomes dissonance.[33] He redefined Easter as a personal encounter with the Risen Christ, the source of vocation and mission. Education, he argued, must be sacramental, revealing God's presence through relationships and community. He cautioned against reducing "shared mission" to mere collaboration, calling it a "secular trap" that risks disconnecting mission from consecration and community. True Lasallian mission involves living as signs of God's presence, especially among the poor, and fostering communities rooted in faith, diversity, and relational depth.[34] The presenters stressed the need for unity in spirit and diversity within Lasallian institutions, warning that without a shared foundation, confusion may arise. Brother Pedro posited that religion and culture are linked, asserting that they are, in fact, inseparable.[35]

During the language group reports, the French group called for a mission-driven approach, in which both Brothers and lay partners remain open to being sent and following Christ's call. This renewed commitment to openness, flexibility, and spiritual depth is essential for the long-term vitality of Lasallian association. The Spanish-speaking group stressed paying attention to prophetic audacity and creativity in responding to diverse contexts and sustaining initiatives through teamwork and leadership support. Finally, the English-speaking group emphasized the need for animation and formation of members into the Lasallian charism and the practice of living in the holy presence of God.

Conclusion

The seminar highlighted the multifaceted nature of the rich concept, diverse understanding, and lived experience of Lasallian association and association for mission as well as the ongoing efforts to implement it effectively and respectfully across cultures and contexts. The Institute's ability to transform and adapt has been, and will continue to be, essential. Continued substantial study of and rich discussion concerning the four key meta-themes presented in this paper—building communities for mission, institutional evolution and transition, inclusivity, and faith in God's plan—is necessary to understand the ever-evolving concept of Lasallian association.

Questions for Further Research and Discussion

How are the constructs of building communities for mission, institutional evolution and transition, inclusivity, and faith in God's plan being brought to life in the Institute?

What are the barriers to successfully navigating and succeeding in living out these constructs?

What can we do at the personal, local, national, and global levels to overcome these barriers?

[1] This paper was created from individual author's collected notes, conversations, readings, and proceedings from the 2024 Lasallian Research Seminar on Association for Mission: It's Development for the Future. In addition, the author drew upon and is grateful for the notes and summaries from the seminar compiled by Brother George Van Grieken, FSC, Ph.D., at the Lasallian Resource Center.
[2] Matt J. Nowakowski, Ed.D. is the Managing Editor of *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education.* He is a retired faculty member and administrator from Saint Mary's University of Minnesota and graduate of the Buttimer Institute. He was named a Distinguished Lasallian Educator at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota in 2020.
[3] Brother Pedro Maria Gil Larraňaga, FSC, Ph.D., lecture, "2024 Lasallian Research Seminar on Association for Mission: It's Development for the Future" (Rome, October 29, 2024).
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Brother Pedro Maria Gil Larraňaga, FSC, Ph.D., lecture, "2024 Lasallian Research Seminar on Association for Mission: It's Development for the Future" (Rome, October 28, 2024).
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Brother Santiago Rodriquez Mancini, FSC, Ph.D., 2024 Lasallian Research Seminar on Association for Mission: It's Development for the Future (Rome, October 28, 2024).
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Brother Pedro Maria Gil Larraňaga, FSC, Ph.D., lecture, 2024 Lasallian Research Seminar on Association for Mission: It's Development for the Future (Rome, October 29, 2024).
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ms. Heather Ruple Gilson, M.A., lecture, 2024 Lasallian Research Seminar on Association for Mission: It's Development for the Future (Rome, October 29, 2024).
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Brother Pedro Maria Gil Larraňaga, FSC, Ph.D., lecture, 2024 Lasallian Research Seminar on Association for Mission: It's Development for the Future (Rome, October 28, 2024).
[21] Brother Pedro Maria Gil Larraňaga, FSC, Ph.D., lecture, 2024 Lasallian Research Seminar on Association for Mission: It's Development for the Future (Rome, October 29, 2024).
[22] Ms. Heather Ruple Gilson, M.S., lecture, 2024 Lasallian Research Seminar on Association for Mission: It's Development for the Future (Rome, October 29, 2024).
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Brother Pedro Maria Gil Larraňaga, FSC, Ph.D., lecture, 2024 Lasallian Research Seminar on Association for Mission: It's Development for the Future (Rome, October 29, 2024).
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.
[29] Brother Santiago Rodriquez Mancini, FSC, Ph.D., lecture, 2024 Lasallian Research Seminar on Association for Mission: It's Development for the Future (Rome, October 28, 2024).
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Brother Pedro Maria Gil Larrañaga, FSC, Ph.D., lecture, 2024 Lasallian Research Seminar on Association for Mission: It's Development for the Future (Rome, October 30, 2024).
[34] Brother Pedro Maria Gil Larrañaga, FSC, Ph.D., lecture, 2024 Lasallian Research Seminar on Association for Mission: It's Development for the Future (Rome, October 31, 2024).
[35] Ibid.