

For a better understanding of the lasallian association

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This text is a talk given to the Administrators of the French Lasallian Centers of the ALS (La Salle Association) in November 18th and 19th 1998.

I have been asked to introduce this time of formation on the lasallian association. To do that, I must first recall what it meant at the beginning of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. As a foreword to this talk I would make three points on the parameters of my proposal with regard to the aim of these two days. For you, who are heads of establishments and responsible for educational institutions under a lasallian trusteeship, this aim is to live out the association better today.

* So, my first point is that I will stick to the meaning of the word association, and the realities that it had in the founding experience of J.B.de La Salle and his first Brothers. I shall thus at least go some way to addressing the sub-titles given in the programme: History, Origins, Characteristics. - It is not possible, however, even to sketch out a development which would relate to another sub-title: « Experiences ‘in the course of history’ ». Since I have not studied this question, I am not even certain of fully understanding what it means. The formula of vows made by the Brothers has for three hundred years, certainly retained a promise of association. But when it is a question of being precise about the content of the religious consecration, the vow of association had disappeared after 1726. The General Chapter of 1986 - and the Rule of 1987, wanted to restore it: I have no intention of speaking of this restoration. However, I hope that it was only the germ of a much more radical renewal.

* My second introductory point touches on a difficulty which appears to me more serious: I wonder if my presentation will do justice to the suggested title: For a better understanding of the lasallian association? I shall strictly limit myself to calling to mind the period of the origins of the Institute. In that way I shall place myself in a human, social, ecclesial context which we find in our enlightened times: the differences will be obvious, I think, as I proceed with this talk. To limit myself from the start to a single, general fact: John Baptist de La Salle and his Brothers grew up in a Christian world. We live in a secular world, it is a truism to say so. But what makes an almost uncrossable gulf between him and us, is that we ourselves are certainly still more imbued with secularisation.

It invades our thinking, our behaviour, our values, almost without our realising it. This is a fact, not a judgement, because I think that, in the main, secularisation is an inescapable social fact and an inroad into the faith. I fear, then, that my words may be greatly “disorientating”, or may seem anachronistic to you, since the association lived and conceived by John Baptist and the first Brothers was specific, situated, and so limited - with regard to the list of workshops for the second day, for example. John Baptist de La Salle could provide no answer to any of the questions we are asking ourselves.

My last introductory point bears on three methodological propositions:

- The first concerns the vocabulary. I have not studied it in depth. I am simply pointing out that the term association is found only seven times in the lasallian writings. They are found in the context of the vow which I am going to speak of. The term Society is used much more frequently: 92 times.

In what concerns our point, the words Society and Institute are used interchangeably by John Baptist de La Salle, for example in the primitive Rule (1718 text) in which the first article reads precisely: The Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools is a Society in which profession is made of keeping schools gratuitously.

- The second methodological point: to treat the subject suggested to me, restricted though it is, I need to refer to the lasallian foundation sequence as a whole. In spite of my efforts to be sufficiently explicit, there are some references that you may find too allusive. Please bear with me, and the talk will give some clarification.

- The last methodological point: to write this presentation I have re-read the two fundamental studies of Br. Maurice Hermans very thoroughly: his work of 1961 on The vows of the Brothers of the Christian Schools before the Bull of Benedict XIII (that is from 1686 to 1726) - and his thesis published in 1962 :

*The Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools seeking canonical status: from its beginning (1679) to the Bull of Benedict XIII (1725)*¹. The two articles entitled *Association*², which appeared in the 1St volume of Themes Lasalliens add hardly anything to Br. Maurice Herman's contribution, so far as our subject is concerned.

In a more historical first section, I shall recall the main stages of the association in the lasallian foundation. A second section will attempt to go deeper into the sense and the implications of the lasallian Association from its beginnings.

First Part

The stages of the association in the Lasallian Foundation

I shall take three of them

1 - Before the association, the project for lasallian Community (1679-1689)

To recall the reason for the lasallian project, and the stages of its realisation between 1680 and 1690, I will remind you of four dates.

1680: JBS came first by chance, then unwillingly, into closer and closer contact with the first schoolmasters employed by Nyel. With an awareness that grew clearer each day, that he had of the situation, he realised that *the burgeoning schools were not producing the*

¹ Cahiers Lasalliens 2-3 (140 and 96 pages) and 11 (414 pages) respectively.

² Thèmes Lasalliens 1-6. Association. Br. Mario Presciuttini, 6A « L'Association comme style de vie et d'action » (p.57-63)- Br. Rodolfo Andaur, 6B « L'Association dans les textes fondateurs » (p. 64-72).

results hoped of them, because no uniform guidance was being maintained³; each master followed his own particular spirit without concerning himself with what might bring about greater success⁴. To ensure the success of the popular schools in Rheims, first of all an educative community for the masters needed to be formed: to this end, JBS brought the masters together, made them live together, and taught them how to harmonise their pedagogical practices. He accompanied them by drawing closer to them, going so far as to take them into his house. Almost simultaneously he was aware of the need to unite them as well in a community which was evangelical in intention and style.

1682: The founding project of JBS, seen in his *radical choice* at the end of 1682 and beginning of 1683. His heartrending and liberating decision at the end of 1682, was henceforth to devote his existence as a priest, to the establishment and guidance of a community of lay-people committed by an evangelical vocation - to an ecclesial “ministry” - realised in the largely secular “career” of schoolmasters - gratuitous schools which they kept as a group in the diocese of Rheims - for the children of the people, the labourers and the poor, who up to then had been denied access to culture and the gospel. Making a slight change to the remark I made about the world of Christianity in which the life of JBS unfolded, I would note without insisting on it, that the priest that he was, passed from being a Church in himself to a Church become incarnate in the world. He used to spend six hours a day in the Cathedral, his preferred society was among the bourgeois people of the Church. He immersed himself into a community of schoolmasters, he shared in their material insecurity, he spent hours discovering from the inside, the base realities of their profession, with the aim of improving their professional quality. The school had to function well if it was to contribute to the salvation of the young people who had been abandoned up to then. His radical evangelical option led the ex-canon into a kind of secularisation in his new way of living the priestly ministry.

1686: The founding project of JBS and his companions, seen in *the first Assembly of Masters* in 1686: that this community “should take itself in hand”; that starting from the life of its members, it should define its identity and determine the important elements of its kind of existence. That is what happened in the debates of that Assembly. The Brothers took a decision together on the choice of an original habit, a change of title (from *masters*, to *brothers*), on an outline of a rule. At the end of the Assembly, those who henceforth called themselves Brothers of the Christian Schools, pronounced a vow of obedience, (which could be understood as a vow of community togetherness).

1688-1689: The founding project seen in the decision taken by JBS *to answer a call from Paris* : a community without “boundaries” (diocesan) or guarantees (ecclesiastical); a community which retained its unity by defending its internal autonomy (cf. *Memorandum on the habit*, 1689, which uses the expression *Community* 40 times, sometimes to refer to the small local community, more often to speak of all the Brothers in the region of Rheims and of Paris).

So all through these stages, *the words association and society do not appear in the lasallian language.*

³ MC 24, MR 23-24. Parallel account in Blain 1, 169-180.

⁴ MR 24.

2 - Towards association: the crisis of 1690 and the first vow of association of 21st November 1691.

2.1 An absolute crisis at the end of the 80s

It had already been fifteen years since he had put his hand to this thorny work, which he watered with sweat and tears. His work did not progress much, however. With every stone he laid in the building of this edifice, he found a new obstacle and while his charitable hand was building it, often at great expense, another malicious and evil hand was destroying and demolishing it. (Blain 1, 311).

- **Crisis in the undertaking** - Rheims: disintegration. The *training school for village schoolmasters* disappeared almost immediately. The *seminary of young Brothers* followed JBS to Paris, but the young men, employed in serving at Masses in St Sulpice, lost their fervour and left. - Paris: difficult beginnings for the school. The Brothers had to work with their predecessors, and the pedagogical aims were at variance. When the Brothers took charge of the schools, they were successful, but their success antagonised the previous masters in charge; hoodwinked, the parish priest of St Sulpice considered sending away JBS and his companions (in September 1688). When his eyes were opened he thought twice about it and his successor, Baudrand, even suggested opening a second school in the rue du Bac. This expansion upset the corporate body of Paris schoolmasters: they feared for their future and began unceasing attacks.

- **Crisis in the community**, more serious: Departures: eight out of sixteen Brothers in Rheims, and two out of four in Paris. Without being replaced by new members.- Lassitude: physical, moral and spiritual among those who stayed. JBS's illness which took him to death's door. Death of Br. Henri L'Heureux on whom JBS was building high hopes. Threats on the internal autonomy of the community: Baudrand wanted to impose an ecclesiastical habit on the Brothers. JBS was firmly opposed. So he drew up (at the end of 89, beginning of 90) the document called *Memoire sur l'habit*: he was defending not so much an original dress, but the principle of internal autonomy in the community, and the independence of its self-government, in relation to ecclesiastical powers. This was to be a fundamental issue throughout JBS's life and throughout innumerable conflicts.

- **Personal crisis for the “forty year old man”**. He seemed to have failed at every level.- He was disappointed by the men in whom he had trusted, Brothers, clergy, lay-people, the young. From 1682, JBS had resolutely set his life on a new path, accepting a radical break to this end. At the age of forty, this new path seemed to reach a dead end. To describe his state of soul, the biographer here uses the word perplexity:

This was the sad situation in which the pious teacher found himself at the end of 1690, after so many crosses and so much persecution, after so many apparent successes, he found himself in almost the same situation that he had been in ten years previously, with few Brothers, making hardly any progress in his work and fearful of seeing it perish (Blain, 1, 312).

2.2 The first Vow of Association, of 21st November, 1691.

At this time of absolute crisis, when John Baptist de La Salle's group of companions was dangerously weakened, when the survival of the community was in doubt, the Founder sought to ward off this death threat by an act of recreative hope. It was the vow of association between M. de La Salle and two Brothers.

MOST HOLY TRINITY, Father Son and Holy Spirit, prostrate with the most profound respect before your infinite and adorable Majesty, WE CONSECRATE OURSELVES ENTIRELY TO YOU TO PROCURE as far as we are able and with all our care the establishment of the Society of the Christian Schools in the manner which seems to us to be most pleasing to you and the most favourable to the said society.

AND, FOR THIS PURPOSE, I, John Baptist de La Salle, priest, I, Nicholas Vuyart and I, Gabriel Drolin, from now on and for ever, until our dying breath, or until the complete end of the establishment of the said society, make a vow of association and union to bring about and maintain the said establishment, without the possibility of our leaving, even were we to remain the only three in the said society, and were we obliged to seek alms and to live on bread alone.

WHEREFORE we promise to do unanimously and by common agreement, all that we believe in conscience and without any human consideration to be for the greatest good of the said society.

AS A MARK OF WHICH WE HAVE SIGNED, Done this 21St November, day of the Presentation of the Most Blessed Virgin, 1691.

In this formula of commitment, we find four parts to the structure.

A transcendent step. The formula of vows opens by addressing the Trinity which directs the whole content of the commitment. It was God who had committed JBS to an educational vocation. The certainty of this vocation received from God does not seem to have deserted him: no matter how dark the night, he determined to follow the same path, but to forge ahead he relied on this interior certainty - And it was God's work that he was doing. He could not give it up. The living God who had been there at the start, who was ever present in that night and spoke to the heart would always be at hand: he would continue to call to creative work and would give the necessary strength and light to answer positively. In this sense the lasallian step is truly sublime, an act of theological hope.

A sublime, incarnate step : *And, for this purpose: I..., I .., and I... make a vow of association ... to .* The act of hope was already translated into a vow of association between M. de La Salle and two Brothers. It was a hope that rested on human signs: Brothers had remained, these two among them: how could he abandon them when they had dedicated their lives with him. How could he abandon those young people, the poor for whom his commitment and those of the Brothers had caused hope of freedom to well up:

His cause was that of the poor and the public ... it concerned their interests alone and not his own; after taking up the responsibility of instructing ignorant and pitiful

youth, he could not, without being cowardly and pusillanimous, return them to their original ignorance and poor education (Blain 1, 296).

The vow of a project: *Wherefore we promise to do ...* This commitment has been seen as envisaging “the establishment of the Society”. Vow of a project, vow of a community discernment. Prophetic vow of a Visionary, who speaks to share with others, and their common word becomes effective action. In the formula of the vow, what was said was already being carried out; the vow began to put into reality what it proclaimed: the future of the little community was threatened. And yet Monsieur de La Salle is more than ever aware of the urgent need to educate the more marginalised young people. He saw that his historical mission was to bring into the Church and town a new religious Society consecrated to human development and the evangelisation of young people who were not faceless and nameless for him. John Baptist refused to contemplate the collapse of what he had undertaken. He simply stopped with what remained of it. To two of the Brothers who had remained faithful, he suggested anticipating the Society he dreamed of, to become co-founders of the association, committing themselves from then on by vow which would bind them together to the life, till death. In the trial, his visionary dream converted the future into a project: *for the future is not what will happen, but what we are doing today in order to keep the promise of salvation glimpsed by those young people received into the Brothers' schools.*

The vow of a new departure, an act of hope today, starting from yesterday for tomorrow (memory and hope): this 21 day of November, 1691 ... 1691 was not an absolute beginning. For JBS and the other two Brothers, the vow gathered together in the mind the totality of the human experience bearing a religious experience: fraternity, service, struggles. - The vow of 1691: an act which relaunched hope there and then. It was not simply a ratification of the past, the vow reinforced the decisive manner of an outline which had first been lived through. People affirm themselves and through that, build themselves up. The community told itself about its project and in that way brought it into being.- The vow of 1691 opened that experience to a future of action. The vow outlined a precise plan but not a rigid one. It did not impose defined obligations that simply had to be observed; in this way it expressed fidelity as a search to be carried out rather than a heritage to be passed on. A fortiori the essence of this did not contain any prohibition, but it was constituted by a concrete desire to find good through perceiving it on a community level.

In fact, the mystical boost expressed and strengthened in the vow of association was not dissipated in an ethereal religious feeling, any more than it revelled in sterile nostalgia. The consecration to the transcendent God opened John Baptist de La Salle and the others to a period of intense creativity, of realistic planning to bring about what it foretold. This fertile tension between a mystical uplifting towards God and being firmly rooted in the reality of responsible actions, appeared first of all in a remarkable way in the formula itself, in terms which would not be found again, unfortunately:

TO PROCURE as far as we are able and with all our care, the establishment of the Society of the Christian Schools in the manner which SEEMS TO US to be the most pleasing TO YOU and the most favourable to the said society.

Blain, moreover, presents *the vow as one of the elements in an overall plan*, produced by the situation and experience, and whose fulfilment was binding:

After greatly reflecting on the means of properly shoring up an edifice which was threatening to fall down even as it was being built, he was inspired. -1. To associate himself with the two Brothers whom he considered the most appropriate to bolster the burgeoning community, and to bind them with him by an irrevocable commitment, to further its establishment. 2. To seek a decent house near Paris for bringing back to health the tired and sick Brothers. 3. To gather all his children there during the school holidays, and to keep them sheltered there, to give them back, as in their first fervour, the spirit and grace of their state ... 4. To set up a Novitiate to form the subjects. (Blain, 1, 312).

3. The constitution, the consolidation and the confirmation of the association.

Three dates, three symbolic and effective word actions: The central and cardinal text for understanding the lasallian association was that of the *vow of 6th June, 1694*. Its immediate significance was clarified by the election the next day, *7th June, 1694*. Prior to this, its range was made clearer by *the secret commitment by the vow of 21st November, 1691* (above). Afterwards, twenty years later, at a time when we might wonder whether he was not tempted to abandon the Institute, John Baptist de La Salle was invited by *a letter from his Brothers (1st April, 1714)* to resume a lived awareness of the association which they had established among themselves.

3.1. The Vow of 6th June, 1694, Foundation of the Association

From Pentecost Sunday to Trinity Sunday, 6th June, 1694, John Baptist de La Salle had gathered twelve Brothers in Vaugirard. He had chosen them himself from among the members of what he called up to then the community of the Christian Schools (about thirty Brothers at the most). During this week, the Brothers and their founder made a retreat. At the same time they constituted a decision-making assembly: it was the first General Chapter of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. The avowed aim of the Founder was to consolidate his young community by the definitive consecration to God of these twelve Brothers: it was on the content and the meaning of this step that their exchanges centred during that week; it was for this religious commitment that they prepared themselves in prayer. In fact, the Archives of the Institute retain the thirteen manuscript formulae of the consecration by which these twelve Brothers promised and vowed to unite themselves and to live in society with one another and with John Baptist de La Salle to keep together and by association gratuitous schools. We even have the formula completely written by the hand of M. de La Salle. Three remarks about this formula:

A. The undertaking of John Baptist de La Salle had started in Rheims fifteen years earlier, in 1679. It was not the first making of vows in the young lasallian community. But it was the first formula of vows of which the text has come down to us independently of Blain's

account. It was then that the expression Society made its appearance, to designate the group of Brothers of the Christian Schools⁵.

B. Since then we have kept the structure of the formula of vows up to the present day, in four particulars:

* The invocation of the Trinity and the expression of a total consecration to God to procure his glory:

MOST HOLY TRINITY, Father Son and Holy Spirit, prostrate with the most profound respect before your infinite and adorable Majesty, I CONSECRATE MYSELF ENTIRELY TO YOU TO PROCURE YOUR GLORY as far as I am able and as you will require of me.

* The stating of the aim and the content of the association (opened by the phrase: and for this purpose):

AND FOR THIS PURPOSE, I, John Baptist de La Salle, priest, promise and VOW TO UNITE MYSELF AND TO LIVE IN SOCIETY WITH THE BROTHERS (twelve names are appended) TO KEEP, TOGETHER AND BY ASSOCIATION GRATUITOUS SCHOOLS, wherever it may be, even where I obliged to beg alms and to live on bread alone, or to do anything in the said society at which I shall be employed, whether by the body of this society or by the superiors who will have charge of it.

*The spelling out of the vows made (beginning by wherefore)

WHEREFORE, I PROMISE AND VOW obedience as well to the body of the society as to the superiors, which vows of association and of stability in the said Society and of obedience, I promise to keep inviolably all my lifetime.

*The ratification of the signature (as witness of which):

AS WITNESS OF WHICH, I HAVE SIGNED, done at Vaugirard this sixth day of June, feast of the Most Holy Trinity in the year one thousand six hundred and ninety-four. Signed De La Salle.

The commitment of association and the definition of its content, formed the core of this formula. And its structure reveals both the Christian, sublime and incarnate source of this association and its priority with regard to the detail of the commitments by vow (which have been made in different ways over the past 300 years).

⁵ Cf. Maurice Auguste, *Les voeux des Freres des Ecoles chrtiennes avant la Butte d'approbation. Cahiers Lasalliens 2*, pages 37-42. *L'Institut des FEC d la recherche. Cahiers Lasalliens 11*: Society: use of the noun in the Lasallian texts, 51; 51, 4; the saint and two Brothers form a S. of three in 1691, 54, 54,3.- Societies of common life. Some examples in the XVIIc, 5-6; 5,6-8; 6,1-8; a promise, an oath, a tacit commitment, one or several vows bind their members, 6, 6,6-8. - The vow of association, 190-191; 190,4; 191, 1-5; the vow of teaching gratuitously is prior to the publication of the petition of 1722, 189-192; 189,4; 190, 1-4; 191,1-6; 192,1-5; this same vow is not mentioned in the Abrgs of 1722, 193; 193,1; differences between the texts from Paris and the texts worked out in Rome, 157. See whole table, p. 441: juridical character of the vows, duration, the vows taken or not by the Brothers establish a criteria to distinguish the members of the Institute, 77 All that would have to be taken up closely.

C. The Institute is this very association, being made thanks to the free joining of persons who, in the faith, answer by the consecration of their lives, to a call from the living God, who gathers these people together by the power of an aim and a plan which are inseparably «mystical and «historic».

3.2. The act of election of 7th June, 1694: An important juridical expression of the Association.

In the thinking of John Baptist de La Salle, the association would not be fully realised until the day a Brother, a layman, took charge. So the Founder tried, from the day after the vow of 6th June, 1694, to hasten the progress of the group to this end. The Assembly was lengthened by a session of election of the superior of the society. Twice the voters elected Monsieur de La Salle. However, this forced step was not a vain coup. The thirteen associates in fact drew up an act of election of the Superior of the Society, of which we still have the manuscript. The wording of this text makes evident, with forceful insistence, the central importance of the association for the collective identity of this group:

Having associated ourselves with M. John Baptist de La Salle, priest, to keep together and by association gratuitous schools, by the vows which we made yesterday,

We recognise that in consequence of the vows and of the association which we have formed by them, we have chosen as Superior Monsieur John Baptist de La Salle.

Our intention being that after him, in the future and for evermore, there shall be nobody received among us, nor chosen as Superior, who is a priest or in sacred orders, and we shall not have nor admit any superior who is not associated and who has not made the vow we have and as all others who will be associated with us in the future.

[The commitment of association was an expression of the awareness of the identity of the group of Brothers. The act of election reaffirmed this identity, clarified one of the fundamental aspects (the lay character of the Institute) and drew powerful consequences from it with regard to the desire for autonomy in the very young Society. M. de La Salle's attempt had, apparently, failed, since he remained superior of the society. But everything had changed, because he was now superior, not because he was the Founder, but, at least formally, by virtue of the free choice of the associates].

3.3. The letter of the Brothers to JBS on 1st April, 1714: the power of the association in an absolute crisis

Our Very dear Father...

We the principal Brothers of the Christian Schools, Having in mind the greater glory of God, the greatest good of the Church and of our Society, Recognise that it is of extreme importance that you take up again the care and general guidance of God's holy work which is also your own. Since it has pleased the Lord to use you to establish and guide it for so long,

Everyone is convinced that God gave you and gives you the necessary graces and talents to govern this new company well, which is so useful to the Church and it is

only just that we witness to the fact that you have always led it with great success and edification.

That is why we beg you very humbly and we order you in the name and on behalf of the Body of the Society to which you have promised obedience, to take care without delay of the general guidance of our Society.

In witness of which we have signed, Done in Paris this 1st April, 1714. And we are with the most profound respect our very dear Father, your very humble and very obedient inferiors..

Another crisis in which the Institute seemed threatened to die again. The Founder had left Paris and seemed to have abandoned his task of Superior. The living force of the association moved a certain number of Brothers to hold an Assembly. And they decided to recall their Founder. By a Letter which was an act, they begged M. de La Salle, they even ordered him to take up again the general government of [their] Society. This unusual step was bawnd on their association (even if the vow which was invoked was that of obedience to the body of the Society)⁶.

In 1691, De La Salle had reacted against a mortal crisis by an effective beginning of the association which he planned; it would take flesh by the vow of 1694. By the heroic vow, De La Salle gave birth to the association.

In 1714, the association reacted to a mortal crisis by reexpressing itself; it took flesh again by the Assembly of the Brothers and by the Letter to the Founder. The association brought De La Salle to a new birth in his vocation.

Second Part

The sense and the implications of the Lasallian Association in the Beginning

The Formula of vows of 1694 expressed an experience which had already been lived for more than ten years in Rheims (and the area around) and in Paris. This experience is that of the “foundation” of the Institute. Very early on De La Salle had been aware of the necessity of gathering the masters into a teaching and even evangelical community. He gradually accepted that God's work for him would be to give himself up entirely to this foundation; he had taken the decision in a radical way in 1682. He gave new impetus to his decision by the vow of 21st November, 1691.

The association of Brothers, as a “plan” and as a progressive realisation became <<the powerful reality of the life of the Founder>>. The vow of 1694 relaunched the project and consolidated its realisation. The strength and depth of the «action in word» represented by the commitment of the vow of 1694, can be measured by the crisis of the years around 1710.

But what was this association? An important reflection first of all:

⁶ Cf. Cahiers Lasalliens 2, pages 67-68; Cahiers Lasalliens 57...

4. A vow of society before being and in order to be a vow of community.

Then an attempt to bring together the elements or the essential characteristics of the association starting with three facts expressed by the following three propositions:

5. It was an association which was seen BY keeping schools together.

6. It was an association OF Brothers.

7. It was an association FOR the Evangelisation of abandoned youth.

4. A vow of Society before being, and IN ORDER to be, a vow of Community.

I thought I had written the final text of this expos in midSeptember. The ideas I am going to attempt now came to me after various meetings, sometimes lengthy, always intense, which I had the opportunity of having in October, with several members of the lasallian network. These meetings ranged from two gatherings of lay-people to an evening with very dear friends, heads of institutions, and, in between, the reading of the advance lasallian educational plan - the stay, at the height of the students strike, in a community of Brothers, several of whom are involved in an educational establishment - and the defence of a thesis on Saint John Baptist de La Salle presented in Lyon by a layman, who is currently a head of an establishment. To be truthful, the initial germ of this new development had been sown in the first text of this expos, drafted in July. I had disposed of it because it had seemed vague at the time, and I have not forgotten the words of Cardinal Garronne at the time of the 1966 General Chapter: *everything that is vague is useless*. Before that the Cardinal had said: *everything that is clear is false*. I hope that this preliminary is useful, while remaining sufficiently true.

I am expressing this preliminary thought in three points: The vow of association which JBS and his twelve companions pronounced on 6th June, 1694 was a vow of “Society” rather than a vow of “Community” - However, this vow committed the members of the Society that it made a reality and shaped, to communities placed in a locality to keep one school, together. The novelty of the vow of 1694 was to demonstrate and restart a fertile tension between “to keep, together” and “to be associated”. If you prefer, a fertile tension between “local Community” and “Institute”.

4.1. The vow of 6th June, 1694, was primarily a vow of “Society” rather than a vow of “community”.

Those who made it in 1694, belonged to different communities. They committed themselves to form a society among themselves, in which each would have the position assigned to him by the body or by his superiors, and in the place to which he would be sent. The society would strengthen the bonds and enlarge the horizons of the limited teams which, locally, together kept a school, and to that end lived together in community. Twelve

only, out of about thirty probably, in 1694 and this distinction remained in the Institute until 1923.

The vow of 1694 represented a decisive step forward in the realisation of the lasallian plan. JBS had initially wanted to promote pedagogical, educative and evangelical communities. The crisis of 1690 showed him the fragility of his work. But he saw it as growing pains: it was no longer limited to one diocese, his vocation became national, and rapidly international. It was important that the requirements of a strong local presence should not exhaust the energy, nor limit the horizons of the members of each community. It was vital that the inevitable dispersal resulting from expansion should be counterbalanced by a strong feeling of belonging to a reality which inspired and sustained the concrete incarnation because it transcended it by reminding it of its aim and spirit.

4.2. The vow of 1694 committed the members of the Society which it made a reality and shaped, to communities placed in a locality to keep one school, together.

For a particular Brother, it was certainly locally that what constituted the aim of the association (to keep schools **gratuitously**) was going to be a reality, after being originally in the Brothers' community. And it was certainly the association represented most often by the superior who had charge of it which was going to gather Brothers to < keep, together>> a gratuitous school. That is all explicit in the formula of the vow.

4.3. The novelty of the vow of 1694 was to demonstrate and restart a fertile tension between “to keep, together” and “to be associated”. If you prefer, a fertile tension between “local Community” and the “Institute” or “Society”.

The distinction between “to be associated” and “to keep, together” seems clear to me, and I don't think it is wrong. It seems useful to me, and I hope it is not purely for my intellectual comfort. I do not believe there is any superfluity between the expressions “together” and “by association”. In lasallian language, the word together appears 160 times. It is used to designate the concrete, local community: its members live together, pray together, relax together, go to school together, etc. Fortunately, some rare writings of EMO and Meditations, bring out the spiritual sense of what may also be source and expression of communion in the presence of God. Without further commentary on this persistent repetition of the adverb, in it I see, that “together” certainly concerns only the local community.

But the distinction becomes fertile, in the light of the formula of vows, if one is careful about the dynamic tension between the “to be associated” and the “together”, or between “the Society” and “the community”. From the Society, each community can expect and receive: inspiration, impetus, help in discernment, examining or even questioning, opening up to a wider communion, humanly and ecclesially. Without forgetting, and it is not insignificant or prosaic, that the Society sends the community new members for whom it has ensured a serious basic formation. But the Society has no less need of the concrete contribution of each local community: their members are in direct, daily contact with the reality of young people and their needs. The local community can and should be creative, and its awareness of new calls, its finding of new ways of answering, enriches and stimulates the whole body of the society. If the tension between these two realities, which

are intertwined, weakens or disappears, there is a risk either of ideology or of routine of the repetitive “all done” denounced by Péguy. I am not going to dwell on it and I come to the three mentioned characteristics.

5. An association which is seen BY keeping schools, together.

The schools that the Brothers keep, together, are of a very definite type, elementary schools, gratuitous schools; and a pastoral objective is the aim.

5.1. The “keep, together” acts for a very definite type of school: elementary schools

John Baptist de La Salle was open to various appeals: training school for village schoolmasters; evening classes; Sunday schools; boarding school of Saint-Yon; house of correction (pension de force). It remains no less true that the “little schools” were the principal theatre for the Brothers. The principal numerically, the principal for defining the identity of the Society.

This fact made the Brothers quite easily “interchangeable”. They gave the same “basic” teaching; they ensured it in all the subjects (limited in number). The transfer from one class to another did not cause upset on the professional level. And the transfer from one town to another did not require a very great effort to readapt. [Nevertheless, the Founder was aware that it was better to give children from the South, masters from the area. That is why he opened a novitiate in Marseille. And the schools in towns whose inhabitants were engaged in a maritime activity - Calais, Boulogne - adapted their syllabuses to the young people who attended them.]

This “tremendous” fact was to characterise the Institute for a long time, with slight changes according to the country. In France, when I entered the Congregation, the Brothers' schools were still very much primary schools - some adorning themselves with a higher primary section. There were boarding schools: one per district, in many instances. And the Brothers had created modern secondary teaching. There is no question of minimising the opening and creativity of the Institute. It is simply a matter of remembering that the Brothers were largely employed in the primary sector. Evidently that was to the advantage of “the association”. It gave to the group an awareness of common identity, and permitted a largely collective formation.

Which could lead to a certain coolness: it happened that some Brothers looked upon confreres employed in different establishments (a boarding school, a secondary school) with a certain “distance”. And was not one of the painful aspects of the disagreement concerning Latin in the U.S.A. caused by the difficulty, if not incapability of certain French mentalities to accept another quite general development, without being aware enough that it related to a real “need” in another context?

5.2. The “keep, together” acts for a very definite type of school: elementary schools.

According to the formula of vows, the commitment of association is first of all the vow of a project, an aim, a “raison d'être”: if one makes a “Vow of association” , it is to keep gratuitous schools. In his commentary, moreover, Brother Maurice Auguste retains only the

vows of obedience, stability, gratuitous teaching⁷. He stresses “the very close connection between ‘vow of association’ and ‘commitment to teach gratuitously’ ”. This remark must here be given its full value. Association has not been “vowed” simply “to keep schools”, together. The society was not brought into being nor defined by “teaching” guaranteed in one, same school by a group of “Brothers”. *What motivated the action of J.B. de La Salle and his companions, what decided them to establish, maintain, defend their “association” was first of all the wish to promote in practice gratuitous education.*

Already, in the *Explanations of the vows* given before 1725, the share given to gratuity was greater than that given to Association. A greater clarification of this question will be found in his thesis, with an analysis of the difference of insistence between 1694 and 1717. Even when, at the outset, the accent was on association, no hesitation was possible: *“the schools they were committed to keep, resolved to beg alms and live on bread alone in order not to abandon them could be only those gratuitous schools, the very reason for the new association”*.

That is why they make a vow of association. From the time of the Bull of approbation, the formula of consecration no longer used the term “vow” to association: *I promise to unite myself and to live in society with the Brothers of the Christian Schools who are associated to keep, together and by association, gratuitous schools... Wherefore I promise and vow poverty, chastity, obedience, stability and to teach gratuitously... Which vows of poverty... The “vow of association” is no longer mentioned. Restoring association to a place of honour as subject for a vow is relatively recent*⁸.

We know with what intransigence De La Salle and his companions established, maintained and defended the inviolability of effective gratuity. We remember the battles they had to fight to stay faithful to gratuity. All through the 19 century, they often had to fight to defend it, standing up to the communes which employed them, since the Brothers were, most frequently, public schoolmasters. When they had to give way here or there, they had recourse to the Holy See and obtained “indults”, But it was possible to continue to make a vow of teaching gratuitously, because this corresponded to the awareness of the association and also, largely, to a practice revoked only by necessity⁹.

I was brought up as a Novice and a young Brother, in this awareness of identity, even if the effective practice of total gratuity had become the exception (for some children, for example, in a school). The gratuity of the school was impossible because of the economic conditions of Catholic establishments. It remained on the horizon of our communal aspirations. It remained the norm for very specific matters (gifts from pupils or their families).

⁷ Cahiers Lasalliens 2, Table des Matieres. But see Cahiers Lasalliens 11.

⁸ Cf. Circular 406, 21.12.77, p. 126-127. See the formula of vows suggested in the Rule of 1987: Wherefore I promise and vow chastity, poverty, obedience, association for the service of education to the poor and of stability in the Institute conformably to the Bull of Approbation and to the Rule of the Institute.

⁹ An Argentinian Brother, Bruno Alpago, has prepared a historical study on the service of the poor in the Institute which is to be given to the Capitulants of 2000, as the souvenir of this 43rd General Assembly. Obviously there is a lot to do with gratuity.

The practice of gratuity shifted to the effective poverty of the Brothers and communities. The absence of an individual salary and the parsimony of the salary allocated to the community helped to keep the school fees low, if not non-existent. On the other hand, and it is not unimportant, association, on the economic level, was lived “from the source” since it was the community that drew the salaries and not the individuals...

5.3. The “keeping, together” of schools aims at a “pastoral” end.

In these gratuitous, primary schools, each Brother exercised a responsibility which can be called “pastoral” without violating either the spirit or the letter of the lasallian reading of that founding experience.

On the one hand, the Brother was, in fact, in “his” class “from morning till night”. So he was responsible for the same group of children for a lengthy period of time. He taught all the subjects (at a basic level). But he wanted to link an initiation in knowing how to live, to these apprenticeships in knowledge. The Brother could establish *an educative personal rapport* with each one. He concerned himself with getting to know them individually as “persons”: the children were not first of all “pupil”, the partakers in such and such a subject. The Brothers also sought to understand them better by trying to discover their social environment, the family background, etc. (psychological realism of the Conduct of Schools of which MD 33 gives the key to a mystical reading: *the Good Shepherd knows his sheep and is known by them*).

In this sense, already, “the association” of a group of Brothers “to keep a school” does not mean the absorption of each teacher into an undifferentiated functional anonymity. The Brothers were easily interchangeable, certainly. But in the fulfilment of a set task, they established a sustained personal relationship with a precise group and with each individual. On the other hand, and equally necessary, each Brother in his class was a “shepherd” in the sense that he not only taught the secular subjects at a basic level, but was also the “catechist”, *minister of the Word of God*, JBS often recalls. This dimension of his activity is important quantitatively, since he had to teach Christian doctrine for four and a half hours a week. The Institute would cling to these four and half hours, a norm sanctioned by the Bull of Approbation. I have also known, if not a rigorous adherence to such a timetable, at least the explicit recommendation to strive to approach it.

Besides, the catechetical dimensions of the Brother's activity, was qualitatively essential and all encompassing. *Essential*, because, in the order of the aim, it was first: no child was admitted into the school unless he followed the catechism lessons; no “teaching” Brother who was not a catechist first of all. And the lasallian texts, especially in the Meditations, do not fail to stress this absolute priority of the explicit announcing of the gospel by catechesis. For John Baptist de La Salle, every Brother was firstly a minister of the Word of God: that was his main task. *You are established by God*, he wrote, for example, in the meditation on Saint James the Great, *to succeed the holy Apostles in proclaiming the doctrine of Jesus Christ and in consolidating his holy law in the minds and hearts of those whom you teach, when you are teaching catechism, which is your principal task*¹⁰.

¹⁰ MF 145.3 - See in Michel Sauvage, fsc, *La place capitale de l'enseignement religieux dans la vie du Frère*, in *Catéchèse et laïcité*, Paris. Liget. 1962, p. 592-600.

The texts could be multiplied. It has even happened that the secular task of the Brothers has sometimes been belittled to extol even more, it was thought, their first responsibility in the catechetical sphere. Catechism was *all-encompassing* in the accomplishment of the ministry of the Brother because it was not solely nor even primarily a matter of communicating knowledge, but of bringing up children in a Christian way of life, *of teaching them how to live properly*¹¹, according to the tenets of the Rule, often repeated and commented on in lasallian spiritual writings. It can, then, be said that the concern for Christian education was at the core of all the educational activity of the Brother; it acted as the mainspring of all his relationships with “*the children who were confided to his care*”. I believe there is all of that in the lasallian language which, using the word evangelical or not, gives the Brothers their ministry as the bringing to life the salvific presence of Jesus Christ, “the Good Shepherd” for these young people. The Brothers are associated “to keep schools, together”. But this “association” is one of “pastors” first of all and especially concerned to be “*for the children in their care*” “*ministers of Jesus Christ*”, “*dispensers of his mysteries*”, responsible for “*announcing*” the good news of the Gospel to them.

6. The founding experience of an association OF Brothers.

Here again, the association revealed itself in a truly meaningful way. It was exclusive. It implied a pedagogical sharing. It worked inside the fraternal < communion> of men bound by the same consecration.

6.1. An Association To “keep” Schools.

By that I mean that there was *complete affinity between the pedagogical team and the religious community*. It was the Brothers and they alone, who kept the school. For a long time there were no lay teachers and the concrete association of the Brothers could certainly feel that the whole progress of the school depended on it. It was certainly even clearer as long as no external power intervened in the school syllabus, time-table, etc. When reading the *Rules* and the *Conduct of Schools* there is certainly a feeling that the Brothers were the only masters on board.

This awareness of real identity and ability “to keep schools, together” marked the Brothers mentality deeply. Even when it became necessary to accept the collaboration of lay masters, it was long continued to see and treat them as “back-up staff”, rather than as true partners of the association. To be aware of this, you simply have to study the evolution of the official thinking of the Institute (General Chapters, Circulars of the Superiors General) concerning the place of lay teachers in the school¹².

Here are two references, corresponding to moments of my life. Immediately after the Second World War, the General Chapter of 1946 was strongly conservative, if not reactionary. Concerning the presence of lay-people in the educational institutions, it firstly

¹¹To teach them how to live properly, to prepare them for work when their parents want to employ them... The educative aim goes beyond school time.

¹² Here it is necessary to go to the study on shared Mission Moreover, I remember that in my youth, a retreat was organised at the beginning of the school year for the lay teachers of the District of Lille. There were not many at the time, one or two in each school.

declared that the first priority was to dismiss all female staff where they had been wrongly introduced. In terms of the male lay teachers, if it is not possible to drop their services, the mid-range objective would be to eliminate them also. Ten years later, the report of the General Chapter of 1956 stated that the members of the Assembly were divided about the place to give to lay teachers: a necessary evil for some, representing a stroke of luck for others. And the Superior General who drew up the report declared that he agreed with the second opinion. For the sake of truth and balance, I will add this: I have just referred to the official language. My concrete experience was one of great friendship and mutual support between Brothers and lay-people.

The Brothers “kept” the school more than the coincidence between religious community and educational team expressed on the level of the organisation of the school by an important identification between religious superior and headmaster. Even in the exercise of the professional task, the Brother was dependent on the Director to whom he owed “obedience”. The role of the Director was paramount for the association of Brothers to work properly in the whole running of the school.

For a long time this unity stamped the behaviour and mentality of the Brothers and I have known confreres who had a real problem of conscience when a lay teacher was placed in authority in the schools in which they were teaching. I can still hear one Brother saying to me in this respect - it was in 1957, and in the Institution where he was teaching, a lay person had just been appointed as “head of department” - *“I did not make a vow of obedience to lay people”*.

The association of the Institute worked in a very real way at the level of each school. Because the Brothers were placed by their religious superiors and because their mobility was not hampered by factors which would not depend on the internal life of the Institute. Because the Brother Director was appointed by the major Superior and because, usually, the span of his “professional” mandate was set by the Rule¹³ which limited the time of his appointment as religious superior. Because *the major Superior exercised his authority*, his control (or his help) *in the professional domain*. The canonical visit implied, for example, the visit by the Brother Visitor to all classes (including those of lay teachers, when there were any).

We are already touching on the community of pedagogical sharing.

6.2. An association which implied a pedagogical sharing.

In a sense, one of the reasons for the early start to the “community” of masters under the impetus of the Founder was the awareness by De La Salle of the risks which the independence, even anarchy, of the teachers were causing the success of the schools in Rheims to run.

So, by uniting them, he wanted to synchronise their procedures, their attitudes, their pedagogical and educational aims. He achieved this quite quickly: this convergence of aims, behaviour and efforts, the continuity that it would facilitate in the school progress of the children would bring about the success and renown of the Brothers' schools.

¹³ Canon law was sometimes quoted, which limited the mandates of religious superiors. But in the Institute, it was the Rub which set these durations 3,6, 9 years. After 9 years, an indult ha(to be obtained from Rome.

This convergence would further facilitate the working of the association in the Institute, in so far as the pedagogical practice of the Brothers was characterised by common features. Pedagogical sharing, then, was that of a certain consensus and newcomers were usually initiated into a certain style and a certain number of pedagogical moulds, bearing on details (for example, use of the signal).

But it would be wrong purely and simply to confuse association to keep schools and pedagogical uniformity, with repetitive tendency and risk of routine. The danger of pedagogical conformity has certainly been a real one in the Institute, and it could happen that pedagogical creativity has not been sufficiently promoted by association. The Conduct of Schools may have been expressed in restricting terms, as also has more than one presentation of the Rule.

But what cannot be forgotten as representing a permanent force for adaptation and innovation is the structure of pedagogical sharing between the Brothers which resulted in the Conduct of Schools.

This conduct has been compiled (by the late Mr De La Salle) only after a great many conferences between himself and the Brothers of the Institute who were the oldest and the most capable of running a school and after several years' experience. Nothing was included which had not been well discussed and tried out¹⁴.

It would suffice to remember all that the Brothers have devised for renewal of the school and the creation of new school models over the course of the years. Thanks to sharing, the association (of the Institute) showed itself fertile [*you simply have to think of the quality of so many school text books produced by a "Reunion de Professeurs": this label corresponded to a reality, as one or other of Brother Yves Poutet's studies has demonstrated¹⁵.*] This sharing in association forms the pedagogical outcome of a communion in consecrated life.

6.3. An association which acts within the fraternal communion, of men committed by a same consecration.

I have already stressed the full coincidence in the founding experience, between pedagogical team and religious fraternity: it is really the community of "associated" Brothers who keep school and it is the Institute that keeps gratuitous schools. Briefly, it has to be stressed that the fact of being made up of men brought together by one and the same total consecration to God, gives strength to the association to keep schools. The converse must not be lost sight of: the strength of association to keep schools can often reinforce the links of fraternal communion, can give body to the consecrated life, can deepen perseverance in religious commitment.

The association draws new strength from the fact of the "*mystical*" dimension which feeds it and stimulates it. **Mystical dimension** : the awareness of a vocation, of a call from God with the Brothers. Mystical dimension nourished by community practices (prayers, formation, spiritual reading, retreats...). Mystical dimension which interprets and upholds

¹⁴ *Conduite des Ecoles*, Preface, *Oeuvres Completes*, p. 597.

¹⁵ I am here referring particularly to a Presentation given in Montpellier, in 1980, I think, on the different activities of the Brothers of the Christian Schools in the XIXth century, under the guidance of Gerard Cholvy, Professor of History, co-author with Yves-Marie Hilaire, of the *Religious history of contemporary France*, in 3 volumes.

the lasallian spiritual writings, written specifically for the Brothers and which repeatedly invite them to discover the evangelical meanings of their work, endeavouring to educate them in the interiority which is indispensable for a teacher, and calling them to commit themselves with renewed fervour, in an evangelical way.

Most especially, the fraternal spirit which quickens community life is expressed in *a specific style of educative relationship*. At the time of a first assembly held in 1686, M. de La Salle's companions had taken a certain number of steps which expressed the burgeoning awareness of their collective identity. One of the decisions concerned the change of name of their community. They decided to change the name *of masters of the Christian Schools to Brothers of the Christian Schools*. They fully realised that this change of name had a double significance: as regards community life in the manner of the first Christians, and as regards the style of educative relationships. This is how Blain ends his dissertation on this topic:

This name of Brothers of the Christian Schools meant to them that as Brothers to one another, they owed one another signs of a tender, but spiritual friendship; and that needing to see themselves as elder brothers of those who came to be taught, they needed to exercise this ministry of charity with a charitable heart.¹⁶

As you can guess, there is no question here of painting an idyllic picture of the origins of the Institute, but of showing the different aspects, the various dimensions, the numerous implications of association for keeping gratuitous schools. You can see that association clearly stamps everything that one could call the manner of living as much for the Brothers as for the Institute. Most of the relationships highlighted can be considered as essential. In fact, the attachment of the Institute to each of them has often conveyed what was considered very essential.

In reality, what is essential is not each one taken separately. It is more the global nature that they make up the dynamic totality in which each one signs up, the vita cohesion which makes them indispensable to the identity and the mission. It is necessary to go further and state that is the reason for being a Brother, rather than the way of being a Brother (and Institute), which is the very core of the association.

7. An association FOR the evangelisation of abandoned youth.

The association arose from the desire to answer an urgent need of young people far from salvation. It was sustained by this awareness in the numerous times of crisis. Finally, what is essential to the association, is the dynamic link between *raison d'être* and way of living.

7.1. It was the desire to answer an urgent need of abandoned young people “far from salvation” which brought about the birth of the association.

It was the experience of the Founder himself. He was bred to his mission by the awareness that he had of the distress of numerous youngsters and the urgent necessity to means of salvation within their reach by establishing a Society of ministers of God at their service.

¹⁶ Blain 1,241.

It was the experience of the birth of the community, *when young people desirous of following Jesus Christ and of fulfilling the most useful ministry to the poor*¹⁷, came forward to replace John Baptist's first companions disconcerted by the evangelical views which they did not have when they became schoolmasters.

It was the awareness which the ecclesial environment of the community rapidly gained, bringing in its wake numerous appeals and the relatively fast growth of the community which made it tend to become a “society”.

7.2. It was the awareness of answering an urgent need for young people which sustained the association, particularly in the numerous times of crisis.

It was true for the Founder. From the moment he realised with certainty that his “vocation” was to setup that community, he threw himself almost totally into the project. His action was inseparably one of “structuring” and “leading” the society. *“The establishment and the running of the community was, for him, God's work”*¹⁸.

We could add to the fundamental project of establishing and sustaining the association:

- His concerns with regard to discerning vocations, the initial formation of the Brothers, supporting them and giving them spiritual sustenance.
- His efforts, in particular, to clarify the common progress of the Brothers by feeding their “spirit of faith, of zeal and of community” by, his spiritual writings.
- His vigorous reaction when he had to defend the work and the originality of the association: from the *Memoire sur l'habit* to the disagreements which could put him at variance with such and such a bishop - passing through the struggle for gratuity - and the school innovations.
- The criteria which determined the reaffirming of his definitive choice after times of crisis, and the renewal of his initiatives as Founder (for example the programme in four stages at the time of the crisis of 1691).

It was true for the Institute. In the first part of this presentation, I recalled how certain remarkable acts of the association punctuate the foundation of the Institute. By virtue of the will of John Baptist de La Salle, the Brothers took up their way of life and their very destiny. This appeared at the time of the vow of 1694 and the act of election which followed, and also when the Archbishop of Paris wanted to impose an ecclesiastical Superior on the community in 1701 - and especially in 1714, at a critical time for the survival of their society, the decisive step of recalling the Founder by a group of Brothers who had assembled together of their own accord.

7.3. What is essential to the association: the dynamic “link” between its “way of living” and its “raison d’etre”.

Why schools? Because, in the context, they seemed to be a structure which was at the same time ecclesial and human allowing “those” young people access to the salvation of Jesus

¹⁷ Blain 1,224.

¹⁸ R.I.8.

Christ. It was to this end that the Brothers joined together to keep schools. It was this aim that they would take to heart:

- to promote and defend the gratuity of schools;
- to transform the school in order to adapt it to the reality of young people, on the cultural and community level and to prepare them for life (human, social, professional, ecclesial).
- to make the school a catechetical place, a place for proclaiming the gospel.

Such thoughts were at the heart of the association; because it was only together that the Brothers could manage to change anything in the situation.

Why a total consecration to God? Because his call, his presence, his action in the history of the discovery of the need for “salvation” were recognised, and also because the educational service to those young people is a concrete way of serving the glory of God; because one was engaged in an evangelical undertaking and one should be “consistent” with the mission.

These ideas are at the heart of the association more and more understood and lived as requiring a communion in the faith and the uplift of zeal.

Yes, when all is said and done, why the association? Surely to constitute a new body of men in the Church totally consecrated to God with the aim of allowing “abandoned”: young people to have “access to the promises of God in Jesus Christ”¹⁹.

Live Jesus in our hearts. For ever !

¹⁹ MR 199.3, quoting Ep 2,12,19; 205,3, quoting Ep 3,6.