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LASALLIAN ASSOCIATION:  
THE ONGOING STORY

## O. The challenge: Live today our founding story

### 1. The letter of January 1st, 2000

The year 2000 will be remembered in the history of the new Lasallian Association with a special significance. The numbers themselves suggest the beginning of a new stage, they are the sign of innovation. At the same time they point to a past on which the new stage was constructed. And so it occurred in the Lasallian sphere: from the beginning of the year a challenge was proposed to us which was expressed in the last Pastoral Letter of Br. John Johnston as Superior General. Its title: *"The Challenge: live today our founding story"* transmitted the urgency of giving continuity in a new manner, to something which had been essentially new, our foundation beginnings.

Br. John let us see in his letter the relation between our foundation story and our identity:

"What I am calling *story*, scholars would probably call myth... According to Richard Cote, OMI, myth, in fact, means word or narrative and is basically a story, 'the story of how a people came to *be* and *think* of themselves as a distinct people...' The Jewish people have maintained their sense of identity over the centuries by telling and retelling the story of God's action in their history, and in a particular way, the story of the exodus from Egypt... We recognize this pattern in our lives as Christians. We listen to, meditate upon, tell and celebrate the story of Christ's passage from death to life for our redemption... We live this precious story year after year, expressing and nourishing, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, our identity as Christians.

In like manner we Brothers of the Christian Schools need to listen to, meditate upon, tell, and celebrate our founding story, the story of how we came to be and how we began to experience and perceive ourselves as original, different, and distinct" (p.10-12).

Br. John then invited us to discover the dynamism which that foundation story offers us for today:

"We need to allow the power of our founding story and the La Salle's interpretation of it to form, challenge, and inspire us. Renewed vision, commitment, and dynamism will emerge from such meditation. We will come to understand the meaning of creative fidelity and we will make it reality." (p.19)

Following on, the largest section of the letter was dedicated to showing how "to be creative while remaining faithful" (Rule , 149) which that dynamism was promoting in the Lasallian world: different forms of living the fundamental charisma. The challenge proposed in the title of the letter was planned with the greatest possible ambition:

"We need to welcome enthusiastically those who wish to become Lasallian associates and help them create new and original ways of living the Lasallian charism. They themselves, however, must be the protagonists in this search." (p.62)

## 2. The General Chapter of 2000

Br. John's letter orientated the whole Institute towards what was to be the main theme of the 43rd General Chapter, which took place between May and June 2000: *Association for the educational service of the poor, as a Lasallian response to the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*.

The Chapter took on the aim which Br. John expressed in his letter:

"The 43rd General Chapter 'under the guidance of the Holy Spirit' must help the Institute *to live our founding story*" (p.10).

From the outset the Chapter situated itself in a narrative dynamic: it contemplated the Lasallian story from a present day perspective, that of the year 2000, and recognized the thread, the link which unites our today with those beginnings. It identified the link where the thread running through our story originates and converges:

"The foundation event which links the Institute today to its origins is that of June 6th 1694, when John Baptist de La Salle and twelve of his followers came together to consecrate themselves for life, to the Christian education of poor boys." (Circ.447, p.2)

It notes and thus reminds us that it is not just a "memory": there is in it an inspirational force which extends as far as us:

"The original vow for the service of the poor, which associated the Founder with twelve Brothers in 1694, is the source of Lasallian associations of lay persons and religious who wish to be part of the Lasallian mission. This is where new forms of association for the mission have their origin." (p.3)

The Chapter, representing the Institute of the Brothers, feels itself forming part of this story and accepts its own responsibility to continue telling it:

"The Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools is the first form of association desired by St. John Baptist de La Salle."(p.3)

"In the light of this, the Brothers need to question themselves continually on how, in practice, they are associated among themselves, so that this association may be a source of nourishment for them, and stimulate their growth as persons, their solidarity with others, and their listening to what God says about the community mission, the educational service of the poor, the reason for their association." (p.3-4)

But at the same time it is attentive in discovering the new actors who are being incorporated into the same story to enrich it, attracted by the mission:

"The development of the Lasallian Mission requires the Institute to allow itself to be stimulated by the dynamism apparent among partners and associates, and to encourage and support collaboration among themselves and with the Brothers, so that all can deepen their own understanding of association, in the light of the observations made, the Lasallian charism and the present theology of the Church." (p.3)

The story continues. But there are new and varied actors, and it is necessary to take them into account for a better service to the mission... But the Chapter considered that at the present moment of the story it is more important to promote its life than to put labels on that life. In its proposals, what stands out is, support for the processes of development of Lasallian association, the promotion of new groups and the respectful accompaniment of new forms of association which are arising from the initiatives of the Lasallian partners.

The General Chapter brought in few concrete forms as to the manner of proceeding in developing the new forms of association. It was much more preoccupied with indicating the dynamisms which

ought to be present so that the new stage can continue the telling of the Lasallian story without losing the link which unifies it.

“There are partners who have a long record of collaborating in the Lasallian Mission and who feel a call to deepen the charism, spirituality and Lasallian communion in which they wish to participate. In particular, their lives are already marked by a number of distinctively Lasallian characteristics:

- a vocation inspired by the charism of Saint John Baptist de La Salle and his values;

- a life of faith which discovers God in everyday life understood in the light of Scripture and , for persons of other religions, in the light of their own sacred texts;

- a community experience of some forms or other suited to the identity of its members;

- a mission of some duration which associates persons with the educational service of the poor;

- an openness of mind which makes it possible to see beyond the individual and his immediate environment.” (pp. 4)

### 3. 40 years of travelling...

The year 2000 forms part of a story, a long chain of years... “Our” year 2000, also. The momentum which was given during this year to the new Lasallian Association did not arise as a sudden inspiration but is one step more in a process which began some time ago.

Essentially this process is very united with the internal current provoked in the Church by Vatican 2; it corresponds therefore to a period of some 40 years. That current shook up the conscience of the Church causing it to recover the original nucleus of its identity: *a communion for mission*. It is here, in this Church current, where we must look for the authentic foundations of the new Lasallian Association, which is also a communion for mission (we can be more specific: *a communion in the charism of De La Salle for the mission of educating the poor*.)

The Acts of the 43rd General Chapter briefly take in the historic sequence which continued during the 40 year period, beginning

with the Chapter which took place just after Vatican 2 had ended, in 1966:

“The 39th General Chapter reminded the Institute ' that working with the poor is an integral part of the finality of the Institute ' (Declaration 28 , 2). The association of the Brothers is a response to this demand. The Brothers are conscious of this and Partners will discover this gradually.

The 40th General Chapter made a serious study of its origins and attached great importance to this vow of association. This coincided with the consecration of the first members of *Signum Fidei*.

The 41st General Chapter addressed itself to the Lasallian Family, thereby recognizing thousands of persons who were contributing to the mission .

The 42nd General Chapter treated the theme of Shared Mission and spoke of Partners. For the first time, Consultants had the right to speak at a Chapter.” (p.2)

Among these great links of the chain we find others which reinforce it. Let us mention three:

- The Rule of life of the Brothers approved at the 41st General Chapter (1986) incorporates the expression “shared mission” and introduces the idea of association of lay persons:

The Brothers “*gladly associate lay persons with them in their educational mission. They provide, for those who so desire, the means to learn about the Founder and to live according to his spirit.*” (Rule 17)

- The letter to the Lasallian Family, signed by the General Council in 1989, is proof of a real spirit of openness and of confidence in regard to the diverse groups of the Lasallian Family, those who are invited “to construct a style of association which reflects well their own identity”. (p.35)

In 1997 the General Council published an important study which contemplated the new stage of the shared mission of Brothers and lay people forming a coherent part of the whole Lasallian story. Its title:

“*The Lasallian mission: human and Christian education. A shared mission.*” The following passage lets us see the path which little

by little has been adopted:

"Association, such as we Brothers have lived it , has had a profound effect on the organization and functioning of our schools. It has been a decisive factor in facilitating our cohesion, efficacy and creativity. Today, under forms which have still to be invented, the same spirit of association ought to continue inspiring and giving life to Lasallian schools, where lay Lasallians are a large majority. The present challenge for the Brothers and for other Lasallians, lies in discerning together, in open dialogue, how to lay the basis for and promote in new foundations the associative dimensions of their commitment to the human and Christian education of the young, especially the poor." ( 3.31. p. 139)

#### 4. A time of transition

*"It is evident that, regarding the practice of association, the Institute is in a period of transition, and that it is important to respect its demands"*, affirms the 43rd General Chapter. (Circ. 447, p.9) This conviction drives forward the experimentation with new forms of association and encourages the Institute

"to allow a period of freedom for the promotion and the accompaniment of structures and forms of association ." (p.9)

Many would like to find the roads already mapped, clear and precise; but they don't exist. It is up to us to invent them. Analysis and discernment will be necessary but without excessive fear of making a mistake.

Confusion of vocabulary is fairly frequent. For some, the concepts that have been appearing in the reflection of these past forty years – *Lasallian Family, Shared Mission, Association, ...* - are superimposed with the same meaning; and where it says *Lasallian Family* or *Shared Mission* it seems now that it should say *Association...* But this is not so. They are complementary terms with distinct meanings.

On the other hand, the concept "*Association*" presents the difficulty of corresponding to a term much used in present-day culture but with a very different meaning from that which it receives in our Lasallian context. Lasallian Association is the result, not of a contract, but of a communion of some persons animated by the

Lasallian charism and committed to the educational service of the poor.

In times of transition, fears abound: the fear of some Brothers of losing their identity, confused with that of lay people; the fear of other Brothers that the Institute has been too transformed by the process of association; the fear of some lay people that the fact of association presupposes being assimilated to the condition of Brothers, losing their own secular distinctness; the fear of others that their family and social duties will be incompatible with those resulting from their commitment to association...

The speed of some in immediately reaching very concrete results, well defined associations, with clear signs of belonging... contrasts with the prudence of others who do not wish to take any step for fear of making a mistake, or to whom the making of suggestions of commitment, seems precipitate.

At times of transition it is much more important to facilitate motivation and formation of persons - Brothers and lay people - than to organize structures which "give the impression" that everything is going well. For this reason the General Chapter suggests in Recommendation 4 that *"the formation of Brothers and Partners be a priority in the Institute over the next seven years."* This formation, before any possible structure, will make a greater contribution to strengthening *Association for the educational service of the poor, as a Lasallian response to the challenges of the 21st Century*. This is how it has been understood by many Districts which have dedicated large amounts of human and economic resources to the formation of its members, Brothers and associates.

In the pages which follow, we have tried to move nearer to the significance, the importance, the characteristics, the demands... of Association lived according to the Lasallian charism. There are five "approaches", as we have indicated in the titles, which help to discover diverse aspects of Association. They do not represent a systematic study of Association, nor do we claim to define, much less "classify" what ought to be Lasallian Association. We just want to suggest paths and open horizons which will animate all Lasallians to launch ourselves into this new adventure in which the Spirit retains the main role.



The concept of "Association" in the Lasallian sense is linked to the concept of "collective identity." "To be associated for mission" cannot be reduced to the tasks proper to the Lasallian mission. Neither is it enough to merely participate in Lasallian spirituality. "To be associated for mission" requires taking on the Lasallian collective identity. "To be associated for the mission is the result of a process during which people take on the Lasallian Identity. It is, therefore, a process of initiation and integration.

During this process of initiation, what transformation happens in people that allows them to become integrated into a collective identity? To respond to this question let us begin by saying how this collective identity feels on the part of those who participate in it. Later we will see how one reaches that point.

### Questionnaire for reflection in groups

1.What is the story of our District (or Community) with respect to the new Lasallian Association?

Indicate the key moments: the entry of lay people into the shared mission, meetings between Brothers and lay people, courses of Lasallian formation , starting -up of groups of lay people, participation of lay people in District assemblies, documents or proposals from the District Chapter...

2.What are the most frequent confusions , fears , doubts , questions...with regard to the new Lasallian Association on the part of Brothers, and on the part of lay people?

# 1. First approach. “Being associated”: Participating in the collective identity

## 1. Feelings of solidarity

The person who has taken on a collective identity is able to say “we”, while feeling in solidarity with the group of persons who make up this “we.” Solidarity is the attitude that unites those who participate in the same collective identity among themselves.

- Solidarity rests upon a feeling of belonging, which includes that of complementarity with the other members: each sees himself as part of something bigger which does not reduce but broadens one's own personality and the possibilities for personal fulfilment in the world.
- Solidarity is seen in the responsibility that each member of the group feels with regard to the purpose or common mission. It is a matter of co-responsibility.
- Solidarity has a vital and basic core: it is the strength of attraction that exercises its charismatic personality over the members of the group. This person deeply incarnates the identity of the group. In our case, obviously, we are talking about John Baptist de La Salle.

The collective identity of a group then, is based on three feelings among the members of the group (we understand “feeling” to mean inner strength, the affective dynamic that moves the person in a specific direction):

- that of belonging, which assures the inner unity of the group;
- that of co-responsibility, which assures the fidelity of the group to the purpose or mission for which it came into being;
- and that of uniting around a common leader, which becomes the common reference point for any discernment and a source of common criteria for the life of the group.

The vitality of the group will depend on the intensity with which it lives out the said feelings deep within its soul. And each member of the group participates in the collective identity in the measure in which those feelings take root in him. Here we note that these feelings tend to commit the person in a profound way, and not only in partial or accidental aspects of life. For that very reason these feelings cannot be the result of trivial experiences, but of a process of formation and transformation of the person.

Let us see now how these feelings, vital to Lasallian Association, come to be rooted in a person. We will speak of two levels that should be kept in mind in the formation process: the affective level and the narrative level. In order to survive, the collective identity must have these two components. In the same way, those who wish to participate in this collective identity must develop both of these levels. The process of initial formation must facilitate it as a fundamental objective. But that is not sufficient. Throughout life it is likely that one of these elements is weakened depending on the circumstances people go through and the group that welcomes them. Therefore, continuing formation which is adapted to each age group must be concerned with nourishing, deepening, and when necessary, recovering each of these two components of collective identity.

## 2. The affective level

Identity begins to develop around the first level through relationships with specific people, the participation in the life of a group, and involvement in a work. The person enters **into relationship** with the members of the group; he is **involved** with them in experiences proper to the mission, and by means of them he **identifies** with the charismatic figure of the Founder.

This level allows the person to become rooted in reality, to establish links with persons, to feel moved by the needs of those he serves, to get excited about the mission, to show his own gifts and abilities to serve the mission.

The result for the group is what we could call the group's "affective identity." The feelings in which these are rooted are very much connected to the "here and now," to the specific persons and works, to the emotional aspects of De La Salle in terms of the

symbol that unites us and distinguishes us in the socio-ecclesial framework. It is essential that those persons feel united among themselves and that they are challenged by those they serve in the mission.

But, if this level is the only one developed, everything will end in one specific place and with the persons in that place. The universality of the charism will not be achieved and, therefore, the charism will not continue. Lasallian association does not happen with "affective identity" alone.

### 3. The narrative level

An identity begins to develop in the narrative level when it moves beyond the "here and now" and describes itself as integrated into a history in which the past enlightens the present and both allow a projection into the future. We might speak about the "historical dimension," but the term narrative refers to something more complex. It is the perspective from which people *contemplate* their lives and discover the story line that knits together all the events they have been involved in, *the source* of the existential situation in which they now live. They can dare to sketch out the way into the future.

A collective identity is more than just the aggregation of a collection of individual identities. Collective identity arises from the narration of events in which people have been involved in solidarity. When these people, in dialogue with others, narrate their collective experiences *again and again*, bonds, which had been more or less implicit, begin to emerge. These are bonds that unite them to the recipients of their work, the bonds that form the story line that unites some events with others. As they develop the narration or story they become aware of their journey. Each new reading normally presupposes a major awareness of the journey they have made together as they discover new aspects or re-evaluate previous aspects or even correct former perspectives.

In the narrative there is a motive or central matter around which the whole story flows. We could say that it is the nucleus that gives consistency. In the Lasallian narrative or story this nucleus is *the Christian education of the poor*.

But the life and interest that the narration may awaken depends on the scenario, the imagination or plot that originate around that nucleus. In the Lasallian story this original imagination that gives everything its unique quality is the will to respond, *together and by association* to the needs of Christian education of the poor. "Together and by association" is the perspective from which the whole story develops.

The narrative and the collective identity tend to extend beyond the specific persons, places and circumstances of their origin as long as the central nucleus and the imagination that sustain the story continue to really be alive. When this disappears or the story is forgotten, identity also disappears because, with the loss of the awareness of the common journey, only the institution, its organization and its rituals remain. These however, have lost their original meaning.

If people are to be integrated into a collective identity they must recognize their place in the story that sustains that identity. The object of initial formation was precisely to help to build the personal identity of the candidates in relation to the collective identity. It was to help them discover and integrate their own *existential story* within that of the collective identity, (in our case within the story of Lasallian Association) until they felt they were part of it ( the feeling of *belonging* ).

This integration within a collective identity brings with it a commitment to continue the story line along the same imaginative lines. It means joining an "*unending story*."

In this way narrative identity expands the narrow horizons of the immediate experience and makes the person feel that he is part of a much broader story, in which his short story finds meaning and understanding. And if faith is the objective then it will be discovered within a salvation history that goes beyond the temporal and geographical boundaries of specific circumstances.

- The feeling of belonging is enriched with the dimension of **communion**: the person perceives himself as being united to other persons in the same spirit or charism, and this goes beyond friendliness and even being close to a person.
- The feeling of responsibility with regard to finality or mission is also enriched when the persons discover themselves to be **instru-**

**ments in God's work**, and when they discover that this work is not limited to the specific program that they have in hand here and now.

- And John Baptist de La Salle is considered to be a **teacher of life and spirituality**, and not merely a symbol of unity.

The "*initial myth*" or founding story that gave rise to the Lasallian collective identity has exceptional importance on this narrative level. The formation process will help each person to re-live the "*initial myth*" (the founding story) and enable him to tell his own story as an updated version of that myth. By re-living and updating this *initial myth* each new *associate* will acquire the *identity* proper to the Lasallian community, and he will identify with the Lasallian charism and will be able to enrich it with his own personal charism.

## 4. Experiences that shape us

The two levels of identity, affective and narrative, are developed based on *experiences that shape us*. People being "initiated" into a new identity - in our case, the young Brother or the lay colleague who wants to associate himself with the Lasallian mission - have to pass through fundamental experiences that shape them and allow them to enter into this identity, to be imbued with it and to make it their own.

### 4.1 To experience life according to the charism

The formative experience is that which make adults experience reality as their own. By means of this experience they establish a link with life, with the world; through it they feel that they are the protagonists and that they transform reality, *they experience life* and based on this experience their perspective, the way they look at the world, is transformed. But this needs time. Their identity is enriched or determined based on these experiences.

When someone has not been able to assume the collective identity, whatever the cause, it is outrageous to ask that person to assume a situation that demands a certain maturity in the possession of the collective identity, or to impose this on him.

- It seems to us that this would be the case when a young Brother is placed in a community with an individualistic lifestyle, or one

that is dedicated to works that are very disparate, if prior to this he has not had the rewarding experience of association for mission in a community whose members plainly live out solidarity and mutual support.

- Or if he is assigned to a middle-class school because the vitality and the creativity of the young Brother is important for the running of the school, but previously he has not had the direct experience of being dedicated, in community, to the very poor.
- Or when he is assigned an administrative position in the organization of an educational work, if before he has not had the experience of association with other lay partners, working side by side with them and establishing bonds of communion with them.

The "rites of passage" within the initiation process - as are First Profession and Final Profession , for the Brother - or the Promise or Sign of Association for the lay person - have among their tasks, that of "saying" (celebrating) before the community that the subject in question has satisfactorily gone through the experiences by which that community is itself recognized, and by means of which it identifies itself with the values that the community protects.

#### **4.2 Experiences that shape Lasallian identity**

In a process of Lasallian formation people must be able to experience these dimensions in greater or lesser intensity. There are many possibilities:

- Being associated, *in communion*, with specific persons for mission and not simply working in an organized team or in an organized way.
- Being devoted, based on gratuity, to the poor, and not simply to the young.
- Having shared *the experience and the encounter with God*, the feeling of being consecrated, deep feelings about ministry, and not simple having prayed together with other persons.
- Having discerned life in light of the Spirit, feeling accompanied based on Association in the overall search for the will of God, having been able to build the narration of one's own identity in dialogue with one who accompanies and who acts as mediator of the collective identity.

The experiences that shape us contribute their richest meaning when they can be read in contrast with - or in light of - the source events and the historic experience of Lasallian Association. The theoretical formation that accompanies the period of initial formation should provide the "interpretative keys" to draw up, understand, enlighten... the experiences that have been lived or that are currently being lived. The individual and/or community that accompanies acts as a mediator of the collective identity. In the dialogue that originates in this process the person being initiated puts together the narrative of his own identity.

## 5. The context of a pluriform identity

The Lasallian collective identity comes to us as a pluriform identity. We can talk about diverse Lasallian identities and no longer just about the identity of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. The story that sustains this identity has been overtaken by that phenomenon which characterizes the present time: *fragmentation*.

The great narratives - the very foundation of collective identities - have lost their absolute character and are no longer considered important in themselves, but for their ability to provide valid and attractive material to personal identities in order to make up the personal stories. It is not that these master stories have become useless: on the contrary, individuals need to turn to them to understand themselves, as a means of personal and community identification. But they must be recovered, recognized, within one's own personal narrative, as a kind of condition so that the individual feels that he *belongs* to the collective identity, which is maintained by that story. That is to say, the predominant perspective is the personal identity, one's "own personal fulfillment," with all the risks of subjectivity that it carries, certainly, but also as a guarantee of authenticity. The individual looks for a way of life in which he can recognize himself.

At the same time, the loss of the monolithic character of the great stories, their fragmentation, gives rise also to double-dealing:

- Each story can be broken down into fragments chosen at will - yes to this, no to that - and it gives rise to multiple small stories. Translating this to personal identity, this would take on specific traits of the collective identity and reject others about which it has no interest. So



then, how is the collective identity maintained? If the tension that must exist between one and the other is broken, the individual's sense of belonging to the group will be lost. We must clearly define the experiences that shape us and that give consistency to our collective identity as a common reference for those who want to become part of it. Without these experiences collective identity will lose its ability to attract and hold us together.

- On the other hand, this same factor has allowed for the same story, which in the beginning gave rise to a very specific identity, to be reinterpreted and, based on that, to form diverse collective identities in more or less concentric circles, that is to say, with common reference points, and others that are more specific to each circle. This is what has happened with the original Lasallian story, which in the beginning gave rise to a very specific collective identity, that of the Brother of the Christian Schools, a "*lay consecrated celibate who lives in community for the education of the poor.*" As this is reinterpreted in the framework of the Church-Communion and even in the context of ecumenism, based on other life situations, it has given rise to diverse Lasallian identities, all of which are recognizable as coming from the same, common family stock.

The new situation has special repercussions in that collective identity that had been originally forged, that of the Brother. If a short time ago it was enough to refer to the founding story to find its own reason for being, this is now no longer sufficient, from the moment in which other collective identities also feel justified by that same story. The collective identity will need to read its founding story based on new reference points that will provide the ecclesiological Church-Communion model, and to do this in dialogue with other identities that have sprung up in this new context, allowing themselves to be questioned and also providing some light because they are, in this new context, a part, or *an extension of the Brothers' own identity* (and vice-versa). In other words, there no longer exists the Brother of the Christian Schools as a pure and exclusive identity, *but the Brother of the Christian Schools in the context of a multi-Lasallian identity*. Of course we could easily reverse these affirmations in order to apply them to the Lasallian identity for lay people.

This *contextual* dimension of identity has been highlighted in recent times, and it is an important challenge for formation. It pla-

ces identity within present history, in a concrete culture but, above all, in a context of interpersonal ties that reveal their interdependence, their complementarity and significance.

The scope of this contextual dimension of identity on the ecclesial level is recent . It will suffice for us to read carefully the following text from John Paul II in *Christifideles Laici*. He makes some statements that we would have found difficult to accept not many years ago; but are we capable of re-reading this, accepting its consequences, applying it just like that to "Lasallian Association," to the collective Lasallian identity, where there is a common charism in service of the one mission, all within different modes of the Lasallian vocation?

*"In Church- Communion the states of life by being ordered one to the other are thus bound together among themselves. They all share in a deeply basic meaning: that of being the manner of living out the commonly shared Christian dignity and the universal call to holiness in the perfection of love They are different yet complementary, in the sense that each of them has a basic and unmistakable character which sets each apart, while at the same time each of them is seen in relation to the other and placed at each other's service."* (ChL, 55).

## Questions for group reflection:

1. Let us compare our personal experience with what is affirmed in the text about feelings of solidarity. Do we think that our initial formation was concerned with sufficiently developing those feelings? Do we notice any special lacunae in ourselves or in others who make up our communities?
2. What does the affective level specifically contribute to the Lasallian collective identity? And the narrative level? What limitations can we detect in each of these and how do they complement each other.
3. There are experiences that shape Lasallian identity. Do those of us who call ourselves Lasallian, whether Brothers or lay colleagues, recognize these sufficiently? Which of these experiences do all of us consider to be fundamental? (Make a list of them starting from those that are essential...)
4. What repercussions does the new situation of Lasallian Association have on the identity of the Brother? Which aspects of initial formation must be given special attention? Which aspects need to be raised again in continuing formation?

## 2. Second approach: "Being associated" A central message of our foundation history

### 1. A revealing story about our identity

The history of our origins reveals our identity, it describes us and tells us what are values are, for whom and why we exist.

Lasallian collective identity has a foundation history that allows us to understand it and to make it understood. The "*initial myth*" of our Lasallian story is the narrative of the origin that is beyond anecdotes because it refers to life experiences that are woven together with the Holy Spirit in the role of direct protagonist. The "*initial myth*" is the narration of how the Lasallian charism entered into history, of how the collective identity of the "Brothers of the Christian Schools" emerged, and in modern perspective how the Lasallian collective identity emerges. It is in our foundation mythology that we find the meaning of our Lasallian identity, with in turn enables us to feel that, as part of the world and of the Church, we have something special to offer.

And within that history there is an event that functions as the center of gravity because of its special importance: "The foundation event which links the Institute today to its origins is that of the 6th June, 1694, when John Baptist de La Salle and twelve of his followers consecrated themselves for life to the Christian education of poor youth. (*The Documents of the 43rd General Chapter, Ch. 1, p. 2*). "The original vow for the service of the poor, which associated the Founder with twelve Brothers, in 1694, is the source of Lasallian associations of lay persons and religious who wish to be part of the Lasallian mission" (Id., p. 4).

Why does this event of 1694 have this generative power, which makes it a central feature of our foundation story? The answer lies in the four elements that go to make up the act of association:

- a) the communion between those making the commitment
- b) the charism or unifying spirit which inspires the commitment,
- c) the commitment of the individual,

d) the mission (the Christian education of the poor), which is the reason for the preceding three points.

These four things give the term Lasallian association its special meaning and make it fundamentally different from what is usually meant by "association" in current usage.

## 2. The journey of the "community for the education of the poor"

The event of 1694 and the developments that flowed from it did not come about by chance. They were part of a process and the outcome of a process and they make sense only when seen as part of that process.

Lasallian Association has a *period of gestation*, which coincides, with the beginnings (the decade of 1680) of the itinerary of that first community - scattered in several houses - made up of De La Salle and his teachers/first Brothers. Such an itinerary is a meeting point of different lifestyles, moved forward by the willingness to respond to the educational needs of abandoned children and young people who are "far from salvation." This call, seen from the point of view of faith, is also interpreted as a call from God. The willingness to give an answer to that call of God and of the poor becomes the driving force of what will become Lasallian association.

- 1682-84: De La Salle renounces his canonry and his personal property: it is not out of longing for perfection or to set an example to his teachers, but to strengthen the community that needs to serve the poor. It was the challenge N. Barré had set him: "to be with them and like them".
- 1684-86: The first gestures of the community to institutionalize its identity: name, habit, regulations... make clear the intrinsic relationship between community and education of the poor. The vow of obedience that they take for the first time in 1686 also serves to secure the cohesion of the group for the service to the mission.
- 1686-1690: The community matures and takes its first steps towards *universality*, at the same time as it experiences the first strong temptations from the outside to limit the range of the

Lasallian community: the expansion from Rheims to Paris, against the financial security offered by the Archbishop of Rheims were they to stay in his diocese; the option for the internal autonomy of the community against the protection derived from becoming functionaries of the parish priest; the decision to maintain a project of a Christian education integral and open to all as opposed to the tranquillity of submitting itself to a school system which was legal but unfair to the poor.

The itinerary that takes shape in those years becomes a *process in which people are being transformed*:

- they see themselves inside a history of salvation which has concrete names and faces;
- they experience communion with other people animated by the same spirit;
- they are introduced into a ministry, which increases their responsibility to God, the Church and the recipients of its mission.

The result of the process is a *new identity shaped by the Lasallian charism*.

The journey, animated by the charism - the Spirit - makes clear the importance and the necessity of the *community as mediator* in fulfilling the educational mission, but also as a *sign* of the educational offer proposed to society.

The journey also reveals the *weakness of this mediation* in the measure in which the external and internal horizon of the community is being reduced. Immediate interests threaten the community, by what is being done and what can be done; it is itself threatened with disappearing as soon as the mission disappears from its horizon. But, above all, the community is threatened by the fatigue or the inconstancy of the people who are part of it, by lack of internal commitment, by the loss of its roots.

The crisis in 1690 when half the Brothers leave the Lasallian community, shows, above all, the lack of internal horizon, the personal commitment which can only arise from the interior man, secured in God, in communion with his brothers and responsible for the work with which God has entrusted him.

### 3. The vow of association: A prophetic act

The vow of association of 1691 and 1694 is the real threshold of Lasallian Association. And it is also the “knot” which resolves the crisis and joins together the two tracts of the journey at the very moment when the threat of breaking that continuity is looming. In the gesture of consecration they are brought together in confidence in God to whom they attribute the project; *solidarity with the Brothers* on whom they count at the moment of carrying out the project; *responsibility for those at whom the mission is aimed*.

- Externally it adds nothing, either to the mission or to the community. But internally *it places them in an explicit reference to God himself*. It is due to this that the protagonists will find greater strength to carry out the project.
- The vow projects what already is being lived into the future. It is a *prophetic gesture*: they state that God is present in what they are endeavouring to do, and that is why they can commit their life in giving continuity to the experience in spite of its apparent fragility.

The formula of consecration or gesture of commitment of John Baptist de La Salle and his Brothers expresses on the whole the bond established between the two dimensions: “community” (“*together*”) and “association for the mission.” The bond points out the lifestyle in community, the radicalism with which the objectives of Association are being assumed and the order of priority among the options a person has to take in his life. In this case, the link points to an absolute solidarity with the members of the community and with the objectives of Association, to which each one’s interests and needs are subordinated. The type of Association that the commitment of John Baptist de La Salle and the Brothers establishes corresponds to an *intentional community*.

- In the first part of the consecration formula the Trinity is presented as the ultimate reference of the Lasallian Association, since the Trinity is the communion model for the mission and the ultimate foundation on which the Association is established, and not the associates’ capacity for commitment or their generosity.
- The whole person is involved in the proclaimed object of the consecration, identified as “*the glory of God*” and Association for the *schools for the poor*. It thus expresses the unity in the Brother’s life.

- The commitment consists of “uniting myself and remaining in society with the Brothers...” it translates into three vows: *association, stability and obedience*. Each one of these reinforces one aspect of the communion for the mission. I unite myself with these Brothers, I promise to be faithful to them (they can count on me, whatever happens), and I accept what they decide. Note that the three vows, directed to God, have the Brothers with whom one associates as their direct recipients. The complementarity is realized in and with them.

- The commitment is not, therefore, immediately with the work of the schools but with the Association, that is to say, with the “Community for the schools for the poor”. From the very beginning it is very clear which is the *centre of gravity*, the essential *mediation* that distinguishes the Lasallian project. It is situated in communion, in the fraternal relationship among the members of the Society, rather than in the apostolic endeavour in itself, even though this is the aim of the communion.

- The purpose is the maintenance of the gratuitous schools for the poor. In this purpose are implied the preferential recipients, poor children. The strength of Association is aimed at the poor, not exclusively, but with a strong preference. It is the aim of the Institute and the Institute itself must fulfill it, not each member individually. Thus all associates accept the fact that they “*do whatever they are assigned*” in society.

- “*Together and by association*”: This marks the style in carrying out the work and also indicates the necessary, fruitful tension between the immediacy and closeness with those who benefit from it - something which favours the community- and the universality and broadmindedness more peculiar to the Institution.

Only a few of those who then were part of the “*Community of the Christian Schools*” (1694 and the following years) made the commitment explicitly with the vow of association (consecration). But his gesture has a prophetic scope for the whole community: the others are affected by the consequences of the gesture of the few and also contribute to the constitution of the Society and the achievement of its goals. This act by a few benefits everyone and serves as a touchstone for all as well as the bond that integrates them all in the Society.



#### 4. A ministerial fraternity for the education of the poor

The community that pronounced the Vow of Association in 1694, and continued to do so until six years after the death of the Founder, would have used the same formula for their consecration. There is no doubt that they felt fully religious as the writing of the Founder suggests.

But when they expressed their identity, they did not limit themselves to copying clichés or models in use by ecclesial groups at the time. They made great efforts to reflect the innovation of which they were the bearers with signs that were points of reference for them before ever being directed at the social milieu in which they lived.

- For this reason they take a habit which sets them apart not only from clerics and lay people but also from the classic forms of religious life.
- And they give themselves a name, "Brothers of the Christian Schools," that directly links them to the Mission rather than to an organisation or devotion and proclaims their fraternal and communitary essence as the lifestyle that will define them.
- Gratuity for them is not only a means for their work with the poor, but also a *sign* that turns their schools into places where all kinds of children can meet, without distinctions of social class. Thus these schools are an effective *sign of the Kingdom*.

We must situate the sign of consecration within this original framework:

- The formula used does not contain the traditional links to religious life, vows referred to as the *Evangelical Counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience*. We can safely say that for this community it is not evangelical perfection - represented by the three classical vows - which is the central motive that moves this community; their relationship to God has another point of reference.
- From another point of view, the complete availability that the formula of consecration demonstrates is impressive and underscores the acceptance of the extreme possibility of living "*on bread alone*." It is a radical posture that is evidently supported by

celibacy, poverty and obedience, even though these are not expressly stated. This fundamental position is an attitude of availability for building up the consecrated community and is a way for the community to accomplish its aims.

- This availability has *communion for the mission* as its central, indeed its only objective. But stated in more concrete terms: communion with these people, with this community, for this specific mission for which all feel responsible.
- The ties chosen to make this consecration explicit - association, stability, obedience - confirm the essential importance of the chosen mediation in carrying out the goals of the community

The gesture of Lasallian consecration is a covenant ritual. In it all who are implicated are mentioned: God, the other members of the community, and the recipients of the work. The gesture of consecration binds the person to the community, the community to the recipients of the mission, and all of them to God.

To sum up, what our first Lasallian community, with the Founder at its head, felt, was that the central nucleus of its religious life was **communion for the mission**, or more precisely: ministerial fraternity for the education of the poor.

They were convinced that they contributed to procuring God's glory to the extent that they dedicated themselves to building this type of fraternity, which they confidently identified with the work of God. This ministerial fraternity is what, in Lasallian terms, is called *Association*. This was the *existential sign* that they lived so intensely, and in the formula of consecration it became an *official sign*.

We have described the consecrated life of a Brother as "communion for the mission." We now do the same for Lasallian Association and for its new form. The religious consecration of the Brother thus becomes a sign for the entire Lasallian Association, which is itself a communion for the mission.

Lasallian Association is constituted not as a work group, but above all as a community of people who feel called by Jesus Christ and sent to represent him. Lasallian Association does not depend primarily on an efficient organisation but on the interpersonal relationship between those who feel themselves called and sent to carry out God's work.

## 5. Association is the affirmation of the community, referring it to God and to the mission

In synthesis, the message that comes down to us from our foundation history is that Association is born *in* the community and *from* the experience of that community, but also so as to secure and strengthen the community, inwardly and outwardly:

- The Association is born to give roots to the community and to radicalise its internal bonds so as to better serve the mission. With consecration, it points to God as the foundation of the community, and to the educational work as the Work of God.
- Association is born to *universalize* that experience of the community-for-the-education-of-the-poor in time and in space. Association is the guarantee of the continuity of the community beyond its concrete existence in a given time and space.

A fluid relationship is established between *community* and *Association* which makes the limits of each of them less rigid:

- The local community feels that it is an integrating part of Association. From a feeling of belonging, it acts as Association's delegate or *mediator* to guarantee that the local project is faithful to the aims of Association.
- All of the communities - *the Community of the Christian Schools* - assume in solidarity the responsibility for the educational works. The problem or the needs of a local community are considered a problem or a necessity of the whole system. The vow of association allows us to speak of a *ministerial community*.
- Association develops bonds of communion among the people integrated in it in such a way that the collective structures which characterize the Lasallian Association - the Institute, in the first place, and each district, later on - tend to constitute themselves as communities that foster personal relationships, and not simply as organisations for an adequate running of the works.
- The main objective of Association is to achieve living communities that can be signs for the mission. Its partners assume their contribution to the establishment of the communities as their first commitment.

Community and Association must be seen, in the Lasallian

context, not so much as two different realities, but as two dimensions of the same reality, that cannot exist independently of each other.

## Questionnaire for group reflection:

1. There are key words that help us clarify the concept of Association such as "communion, charism, commitment, and mission." Make a "conceptual map" where these and other terms related to Lasallian Association are present.
2. In the second section we saw a journey where many different lives joined in order to respond to the *educational needs of abandoned children and young people*. In the course of this process these people are transformed. What is our experience of the personal and collective transformation of those with whom we work in our Lasallian centers, called to respond to the needs of young people?
3. Since 1987 the Vow of Association for the educational service of the poor has returned to the formula of consecration of the Brothers even if it is 4th place after Chastity, Poverty, and Obedience. Does this 4th place represent secondary importance for the identity of the Brother? Do we believe that the Brothers at large are aware that the Vow of Association is, in reality, the nucleus of our identity as consecrated men, and that they, therefore, should be signs for the whole Lasallian Association?
4. Do we believe that the theological expression "communion for the mission" is clear enough to define the essential nucleus of Lasallian Association? What other expression might we use to express it?
5. Clarify and illustrate the relationship between the two concepts of "community" and "association." What is the particular contribution of each one to the Lasallian identity?

### 3. Third approach. “Being associated”: a process of communion for the mission

#### 1. Entering into the narration to follow the story line

Identity is a living thing, not some fixed definition. It is an ongoing story. But within this narration, what is the story line that unites some events with others and gives them meaning? If we miscalculate the story line the narration develops incorrectly; if we distort the plot, the story loses focus and identity is frozen in time. The narration of the Lasallian “founding myth” has taught us that the backbone of this identity is communion for the mission. That is the center of the religious life of the Brother. The object of his promise is entering into a process of communion, in a system of fraternal relationships. These are not founded on affinity or on a common work but rather on God's call to form a *ministerial fraternity for the education of the poor*. The direct object of the promise is the building up of this ministerial fraternity because it is a sign of the faithful love of God for the poor. With the vow of Association the Brother says that he wants to give his whole life to maintain this sign of God's love for the poor.

The imagination that gave vitality to our narration has begun to have new life as the institute enters into the process of the shared mission. The process of *communion for the mission* is what the Holy Spirit has given us and helps us to discover in the historic situation we call “shared mission.”

The vocational journey of the educator develops within this process of *communion for the mission*. These two powerful ideas, which cannot be separated from each other, might be summarized in this way:

- For the whole group of educators, Brothers and Lay people, *the process of communion for the mission* consists of a continuous creation of bonds among people. Those *bonds* promote, above all, mutual appreciation, solidarity and co-responsibility. Thus

they give life to the educational community; they develop communion in faith until it gives birth to the Christian community; finally, they come together around God's work, they encourage mutual commitment and the experience of sharing the ministry; they lead to the formation of the *ministerial community* which makes itself responsible for giving life to the educational work based on the Lasallian charism.

- Within this process of communion is included the vocational journey of the educator which leads people to discover a deeper sense in their educational endeavour, including the pastoral aspect. It first develops the vocational and community dimension of their identity; if faith is present in those people, the itinerary takes them to live out education as a meeting place with God; finally, they come to *live education as a ministry* based on a stable commitment.

## 2. The Lasallian charism, backbone of the whole process

Above all, to be associated is an experience of communion, before it is ever a commitment or even a prior condition to becoming a commitment of association. Communion is the *relationship* established among people with a *common spirit*. The communion process is not limited to promoting the relationship among those committed to the Lasallian project; it must, at the same time, promote the *sharing in the common Lasallian charism*. In other words, it promotes a relationship from the starting point of the characteristic spirit of the Lasallian charism.

*The Lasallian charism* will be present in the whole process:

- It is the constructive axis in the building of the identity and formation of Lasallian educators. It is the *orientation* imprinted on the whole process and which implies a style, a special sensitivity in the face of certain needs, some preferences when selecting the recipients, some criteria and options when planning the answers, and a way of valuing the mission.
- It gives birth to Lasallian *spirituality*, which accompanies the whole process of the educator's training:

1) revealing the meaning and the human depth of the educational task

2) discovering it as a privileged place in the person's relationship with God.

- It is made visible through a *historical heritage*, which brings along with it a type of culture. Lasallian culture refers, first of all, to the historical itinerary of De La Salle and his Institute, to certain pedagogical achievements and to certain expressions of faith. All this can be communicated at given moments of the training, depending on the receptivity of those for whom it is intended.

The process developed leads naturally to the integration of the people in local communities at their different levels: the educational community, the community of faith. At a more universal level we could speak of the Lasallian spiritual family.

But this process is long and complex, since it involves entering on a *life journey*, which implies personal transformation; it also means entering into a *new system of interpersonal relationships* and an *historical heritage*, which offers motivations and requires a time of training. This development is absolutely necessary if we are to have people who wish to commit themselves in the Lasallian Association.

### **3. Entering into the process of association: from what is close at hand and real**

In the first approach that we had of the concept of Lasallian association, we saw how the affective level is the first axis around which identity develops. This begins in the relationship with real people, the participation in the life of a group, and by involvement in a work...

The participation in concrete projects and in the local Lasallian communities is a necessary step to discover Lasallian Association, and for a possible commitment to it. As in the origins, Lasallian Association nowadays can spring forth only from the journey of the community so as to respond to the educational needs of the poor. Along the way people discover and deepen their understanding of those sentiments that allow them to feel that they are a part of the collective Lasallian identity.



### **A) Discovering the mission through participation in concrete projects.**

The Lasallian mission is fulfilled through educational projects, such as various types of schools, catechumen programmes, recovery of students who are marginalized and so on. Real participation in some educational endeavour is essential to understanding the Lasallian mission and to committing oneself to Association for the mission. The move from the concept of endeavour to that of mission is easier when one accepts a responsible part in that endeavour rather than simply doing a job. This is even clearer when that responsibility is taken and discerned in community. If we wish to speed up the step towards the third approach we must propose *involvement in significant educational endeavours* in the service of the poor to those groups and communities engaged in the process of the shared mission.

The enthusiasm for a concrete project, in response to some concrete need, is not equivalent to *availability for the Lasallian mission*, which is an essential component in the commitment with Association. But people must have experienced the first if they are to be open to God's Work and to feel God's call to participate wholeheartedly in his Work. It is in this process of discovery, which must be encouraged and accompanied, that the attitude of availability arises, which, for some people will lead to the association commitment.

### **B) Discovering Association through participation in local communities.**

An educational project is *a coming together* of the various Lasallian associates, together with other collaborators or partners. The Lasallian community takes shape around a single project or around several nearby ones in a communion of communities in which groups of Lasallian associates take part, each group with its own identity. In the relationship and coexistence with those already associated, other collaborators can discover this second essential component of the association commitment: *the communion and solidarity with the other members of the Lasallian Community*, rather than with the concrete works.

The shaping of *the local community* is a priority objective for the Lasallian Association, since it is the sign that reveals the sense of the educational project. It is a guarantee of efficiency for the pres-

ent and hope for the future as well as being the place where the Association is born and *reborn*.

The local community includes *associate* members (those who have engaged in the Association through their commitment) and other members who have *integrated* themselves in the community to reinforce its character of sign and/or to serve the local educational project. The associate members have a special responsibility acting as the leaven of communion in the local community.

The local community develops in various levels and structures. The wider level or circle is that of the educational community. The community of faith (which can integrate several Christian communities) is usually smaller. There can be other intermediate community structures, with specific purposes, such as the team animating education for justice, or *the local team of our shared mission* (they are supposed to be not only reflection and work groups but also developing communion among their members).

None of those levels and community structures requires the commitment of association to be able to take part in them, even when they have assumed living Lasallian spirituality in a more or less clear way, as in the case of a "De La Salle Christian community". But it must be clear that each and every one of those levels and structures, though in a different way and in various degrees, are *launching pads* for the commitment with Association. It is a quality leap that can be given only *through the experience of communion for the mission*. Some then reach a commitment to Association when that experience is perceived as a *call* to give continuity to the "*community for the education of the poor*" and as the sign that this community represents, beyond a concrete time and space and, therefore, beyond and above immediate personal interests.

### **C) Discovering the relevance of the Lasallian charism in the search for original answers to present-day needs.**

The association commitment refers to *incarnating the Lasallian charism in the Church today* so as to respond with concrete projects, from the particular aspects of this charism, to the urgent needs we discover in the educational situations of children and the young especially those affected by poverty in our world.

To come to assume the third essential component of the associa-

tion commitment it is necessary *to be involved in community in the dynamics of perceiving and discovering* the needs of the young and in the planning of the solutions, also in community. The life journey of John Baptist de La Salle and the Lasallian Association of our beginnings, will be present in this dynamic as a reference point which enlightens the new stage that nowadays has been entrusted to us.

The dynamic we are referring to is usually carried out through already functioning educational projects, such as the present Lasallian schools; but the existence of this dynamic at the heart of the organization of the project is what marks the difference between “incarnating the Lasallian charism today” and “maintaining an educational work through sheer routine or inertia”. The associate members assume here their prophetic role as well. Their message must be very clear: the objective of the Lasallian Association is not to maintain existing works and structures, but rather *to incarnate the Lasallian charism in the Church and the world today*.

## Questions for group reflection:

1. How can we encourage the experience of communion among Lasallian educators, Brothers and lay people, in the concrete reality of each local situation, in our District? What kinds of bonds ought we promote, based on what has already been achieved?
2. What steps or stages can we distinguish in the vocational journey of an educator? How do we take these into account in our District formation programs?
3. What are we presently doing in our District, in our educational center... to help educators participate in the Lasallian charism? What aspects might we give more attention to?
4. What does the expression "Lasallian spiritual family" suggest to us? What are its limitations? Do we see the relationship to and difference from the expression "Lasallian association?"
5. What local and District experience do we have of the discoveries noted in section 3? What means do we use to facilitate these discoveries at the District and local levels?

## 4. Fourth approach. "Being associated": committing one's life to Lasallian association

### 1. Commitment as a life choice

It is not the same thing "to train oneself" or, even, to give a meaning to what is being done, as *to commit oneself* completely to Lasallian Association. The first corresponds to the general aim of the formation given in the phase of the "shared mission", and which should reach the greatest possible number of laypersons who collaborate in Lasallian educational works. The second one is a vocational option, and can be expected from only a much smaller number.

The first Lasallian Association arose from that commitment sealed in the Act of Association of 1694. The new Lasallian Association of Brothers, other consecrated religious, lay people and priests will also be the result of a mutual commitment among persons who want to associate themselves to continue serving with in the communion of the Lasallian mission.

*The motivation:* Exactly as in the origin of Lasallian Association, the new Association finds its motivation and original nucleus in the educational needs of the children and the young "*far from salvation*" as well as the willingness to answer the call, which is perceived as God's call. The commitment is within a process of the relationship of three dimensions: *God, the community, and the children*. Each one enters into the journey through one or other of the three dimensions. However, once the journey begins, the motivating force that drives the process is the call of the abandoned children and young people and the will to respond to that call. This is the aim that shapes the other two dimensions, that justifies the existence and the process of association.

*A Radical and stable commitment:* The fulfilment of a project depends on all the people involved in it, even on those who are passers-by or have other motivations. But the *continuity* of the project, especially in its dimension of universality, needs *stability*,

that is to say, people whose very presence, demonstrates the priority maintaining the project above their immediate personal interests. To be faithful to the project and its initial purpose and to its preferred beneficiaries we need "*prophets*", that is to say, people who assume a certain radicalism to keep a watchful eye on that faithfulness. The *commitment* that fulfils these two characteristics - stability and radicalism - (we are speaking about a human context that is always fragile and relative), is what allows "Association" to fulfil its purpose.

*Inside an itinerary:* The commitment gesture is not made overnight. It must be discerned; it must be situated in an itinerary in which people keep discovering the direction they want to give to their life and what God asks from them. It must be carried out from the knowledge of each one's capacities and the commitment it implies. And even then, one has to run risks. The same *process of communion for the mission* characteristic of the previous threshold is the one that prepares this commitment of association, and without that process it will not be possible to reach this threshold.

The process helps to revive the "*initial myth*" (=the foundation story). Little by little, people can narrate their own story as the present day context of that *myth*. In the narrative, with the different emphasis of each, there come together the essential components of Association: *communion, Lasallian charism, commitment, and mission*. The commitment to Association must not be fulfilled before achieving a certain harmonious synthesis of those four components.

The sign: Association is founded on signs of solidarity and interdependence. It is necessary to express the commitment by coming to agree on signs which make specific the scope of the commitment. We need to support one another and we need to know upon whom we can rely, whom we are counting on and to what extent.

The commitment to which Association refers is one with people (the other members of the Association) rather than with its works. The commitment here does not refer primarily to the work-task nor does it consist of doing more things. *It refers explicitly to the Lasallian community* in its various levels. It is translated into *relationship*, into sharing, into communion. And finally it manifests itself in *belonging*. It is a bond that creates solidarity with others, and therefore demonstrates dependence on one another. It does

not consist only in "*taking part in*" but in "*belonging to*," "*depending on*", or better still: "*being interdependent*." This is what creates the Association. The sign by which people commit themselves tends to make the sign of the community more visible, just as the immediate purpose of the Association is to set up the "community-as-sign".

- Consequently, any association commitment should follow -and frequently precede- the active integration with the other associates in the *corresponding community structures*, both at the local level and beyond it.

*The community is inseparable from its purpose* and is justified by it. To commit oneself to the community is to strengthen the sign of its way of serving the purpose: the evangelization of abandoned youth, through education. It is the "Community of the Christian Schools".

To commit oneself is to assume the recipients and the aims of the Lasallian Community as one's own:

- The preferential beneficiaries: the "abandoned" children and young, that is, the poor; and the poorest among them.
- Its fundamental aims: an education, which is complete and evangelizing.

Therefore, it means solidarity with the process of evaluation and discernment of the educational works so that they respond better and better to the Lasallian project.

## 2. Commitment situates the person within a dynamic of transcendence

The association commitment can take several forms. All of them have as their common denominator *the will to incarnate the Lasallian charism today, in communion with other Lasallians, for the benefit of the Christian education of youth, especially the poor, and to do it with a certain stability*.

In any of its forms, the association commitment is a leap, however big or small, because there is a change of level; it is *the step from the concrete and the particular to the universal*. It is not a flight from reality because the leap has its return, to discover afterwards

the universal dimension lying in the concrete and the peculiar.

- The commitment implies, in a first moment, *overcoming the immediate*, not to be dominated by the concrete circumstances that surround a project, not accepting dependence on the hypothetical success or failure of the project, or limiting the enthusiasm and dedication to the concrete recipients of the project. All of this is true because the person, illuminated by faith, has transcended the particular situation and feels that he is partaking in the Plan of God, the Work of God, the Kingdom of God. He has discovered himself to be an instrument in the service of that Work, and with that global perspective he assumes the particular project because with it he fulfils, here and now, the mission received from God.
- The association commitment implies also *overcoming the bonds characteristic of the immediate community* -the personal sympathies, the abilities and interests of concrete persons, the internal plans. This does not mean to renounce them, but to relativize them in terms of a wider horizon, that of the *communion for the Lasallian mission*. In this communion other people whom we have not chosen take part but with them we feel called for the Lasallian mission. The association commitment underlies the authentic foundation and motivation of the community, the mission. Thanks to this commitment this community becomes ministerial, because the responsibility assumed in community before God and the Church regarding the mission - and the projects in which the mission is specified - acquires priority, rather than the personal whims or wishes of the moment.

Finally, the association commitment implies moving beyond the way we analyse the situation of poor children and look for answers; not because we disregard it, but because the Lasallian charisma, or rather, the Spirit, surpasses that dynamic. Those who commit themselves in the Lasallian Association have had to discover in their hearts the light with which God enlightens "*those whom He has chosen to announce His word to the children*" (MR 193,1). That is why they do not feel satisfied with a dynamic of analysis, but need a *spirituality* from which they can find and live wholeheartedly the sense of what is being done. The commitment implies *the option to live Lasallian spirituality*, from which they might incarnate the Lasallian charisma in the Church and in the world today.



### 3. Commitment is a gift offering, more than a contract

The commitment with the Lasallian Association is more an *offering* than a contract (even if it also has the characteristics of a contract), for the same reason that the Lasallian Association is more a *communion* of people, united by the Spirit to serve the Lasallian educational mission, than an organization (even if it is also an organization).

- Therefore the gesture of commitment is usually expressed as a *feeling of offering*: in the form of a vow, promise, sign of availability, etc., and it marks out the three recipients of the offering: God - as origin and end of our offering - the other partners of the Association as mediators of the offering and those who have motivated this Association, the boys and the young in need of education.

- The mediators of the offering are the other associates. In a general sense, all those who share the Lasallian mission, but in a specific and explicit way the association commitment refers to the people of a group or institution with which, in an interdependent way, it commits itself to maintaining the purpose of the Association.

- The gesture of the commitment picks up substantially the purpose of the association. The Lasallian charism arises historically with a clear *purpose*: "the human and Christian education of the young, especially the poor"; but - always in reference to the integral unity of the project - it is possible to stress charismatically *some nuclear aspects of the whole* without losing the global perspective: education for justice, the strengthening of the community in all the educational aspects, the growth of interiority and of faith... Above all, the new situations and needs of the young can also awaken new ways of living and of applying the Lasallian charism in community. It is the Spirit who has the word.

- The object of the offering - the matter of the commitment- is oneself. It is life that is at stake. People commit themselves to a *way of life*, in solidarity with other people, from *attitudes*, which guide life in a particular direction. We should notice the difference: the benefactors give of their time or their money... the

Lasallian associates give their own person, integrating it in interdependence with other people.

Commitment is life: it goes beyond the sign, which expresses it, and it must not be confused with it. The Association needs signs to be visible. It also needs to be able to institutionalize, a necessary condition for its continuity. But not everybody within the Association has to express their commitment with a sign. What is really necessary is to live the commitment *in a visible way*. This shows itself in a double dimension:

- 1°. *The communion for the mission* is lived out with a clear feeling of membership and interdependence in two levels closely related:

- In the immediate level, with a group of people with whom we live communion “here and now” and share and deepen the Lasallian charisma. With them we try to build or strengthen the sign of the local community before the recipients of the mission, and it is to that aim that we work in developing the bonds of communion with the other groups of associates if there were any (for instance, lay people and Brothers) and with all the others who share the mission.

- In the universal level (or tending to the universal), with the Lasallian institution in which the latter group is included, or the one which serves as reference in the tutorial phase of maturing in the Lasallian charism. The solidarity towards the rest of the Lasallian Association is extended through this institution.

- 2°. *The lifetime availability for the mission* is made operative when assuming a more or less structured and detailed plan whose main lines are defined in the two levels of interdependence: in the framework of the Lasallian institution and that of the local group or community. The plan bears direct relationship with the type of identity of the associates (lay, religious...) and with the Lasallian charismatic orientation we intend to give to this identity. Thus, it will tend to specify:

- its relationship and participation in the Lasallian heritage;
- the relationship of its specific Christian identity with the Lasallian mission;
- its contribution to creating the community;

- the experience of Lasallian spirituality;
- the availability for the mission;
- the interdependence with the Lasallian institution;
- permanent formation.

### Questions for group reflection:

1. Which ideas of affirmation require clarification? Which should we emphasize? Are some open to discussion?
2. Make an outline to synthesize the most important content of the theme "commitment to Lasallian association."
3. It might be interesting for each one to review and revise his own commitment with Lasallian Association based on what we have seen in this section. Later you might freely share your conclusions with the group.

## 5. Fifth approach. Association for the lasallian mission in the Church- communion

### 1. Church dynamisms guide the new Association

The new Lasallian association is growing within the context of a new model of Church driven by the Second Vatican Council. Nowadays our Church defines itself as "Church-Communion", and its mission, its *raison d'être* is: evangelisation.

For today's Church, "*the mission affects all Christians*" (RM 2) and it must be fulfilled in *communion* with each other, but also in *cooperation* with all men and women of good will (cf GS 43; VC 81)

- Internally it is constituted on the following binomial: "*community ministries and charisms*", where unity is anterior and is fundamental to the distinction. We underscore both the common Christian condition and the free and varied initiative of the Spirit, which raises the variety of ministries and charisms for our common utility in the Church. It is a design, which, therefore, values differences, but in a complementary way, which sees them as being, subordinated to unity.

- In this new ecclesial "*ecosystem*", the religious -the Brothers- are no longer separated from other Christians - much less are they *above them* - but *together with* and *in function of* the other Christians in collaboration with other educators. They have no exclusive tasks: what is peculiar to them is to *be a sign* which invites to advance in reference to God and his Kingdom, in communion and in the most committed aspects of the mission.

The insertion of all Christians in the ecclesial mission is carried out based on their peculiar *charism* (or charisms), that is, on the graces received from the Spirit for the community. What is more, in the case of ministries or services that are important for the community, they are also carried out based on the recognition or

designation of the ecclesial community through its representatives.

- The charism, being a gift received for the service of the community, is neither a personal right nor a mere ecclesial mission: it is a gift of God, which needs an ecclesial guarantee. This guarantee is given in the same field for which the charism has been destined, whether it is the small community, the local Church or the universal Church.
- The participation in an ecclesial mission, whatever it is, does not consist only in responding to a necessity, but in doing so from within a concrete charism. When this is recognized it produces a ministry, an ecclesial identity. (See in the Rule FSC the decree of approbation by the Church. "*The Brothers are called to... (mission)... according to the ministry which the Church has entrusted to them*".)
- The Lasallian charism produces a peculiar *spiritual affinity* (cf.ChL 24) among many people, in the service of Christian education. That means that the Lasallian ministerial community can never be reduced to a "work organisation". It is this common charism that gives it an identity, life and a possibility for its own development; and it does not prevent but stimulates the presence of other personal or shared charisms for the benefit of the common mission (cf General Council *A shared mission*, 3.34)

Any foundational charism, because of its meaning for the ecclesial community and because this community is the trustee for this charism, receives its warranty from that community: first from the local Church, then from the universal Church. It is then that the foundational charism is *institutionalized* (that is to say, officially recognized); and the corresponding institution (in this case the Institute FSC) is the site of the charism's certification for those who believe they have received it from God.

- A foundational charism - such as the Lasallian charism - can be discovered and lived, based on other forms of Christian life, different from the one in which it was born in the first instance. The new ways of living the Lasallian charism require an initial recognition from the Institute FSC, which is the official bearer of the charism before the Church. But when a new Lasallian group reaches maturity and receives its certification from the diocesan and

universal Church, then it is no longer within the Institute's competence to guarantee or supervise the experience of the Lasallian charism in that new form, but of the group which has assumed it (this is the case with the Institute of the Hermanas Guadalupanas de la Salle, and the Institute of Catechists of Jesus Crucified).

- How, therefore, can we make sure of something so important as the maintenance of the original dynamism of the foundational charism, so that it be common to all Lasallian institutions? Only through *communion* among the institutions. From the starting point of that communion, structures will be created so that we can specify and deepen it, on a double level: that of the universal Association, which corresponds to the people who are responsible for the associations, and that of the local communities, which can be grouped in a communion of Lasallian communities, whose most appropriate frame of reference will be the District.

## 2. Orienting the new association: “the solar system”

The new “planetary solar system” can serve us as a model to apply the previous criteria to the new Lasallian Association. In the centre of the system is the sun, the Lasallian star, that is to say, *the mission that calls us all* and around which we move. The charism is something like the force of gravity with which the mission attracts us and the dynamism, which moves us around it to give the appropriate response. The associates form the planetary system, which surrounds the Lasallian mission, but how do we place ourselves in the system? How do we associate? How and to whom do we show our membership?

In this scheme of the planetary system there can be *two extreme alternatives*:

1. A single planet in the system, rotating around the Lasallian mission: it is the Institute FSC; around this planet FSC several satellites are placed, the new Lasallian associates, individually or in homogeneous groups. This has been the most common system up to now.

2. Several planets make up the system: FSC, Lasallian Sisters... And others which could start existing as autonomous planets,

even if they work more like satellites of the planet FSC for the time being: "De La Salle Christian Communities", "Signum Fidei", and so on. That is to say, the new associates find their own orbit around the Lasallian Sun, according to their identity.

There can be occasional intermediate solutions, but which direction do we take? The criteria derived from the Church-communion, point out clearly in that second direction. In this case our proposal is that it is necessary to promote the *autonomy* (which implies the formation and maturation in the Lasallian charism) of the groups of lay and consecrated people, which spring up around the Lasallian mission. Other structures will have to be invented which assure the *communion* among the different groups and institutions.

In this "planetary system" model, each orbit symbolizes a *vocational identity*, or more exactly, a group of characteristics common to several people, which represent a particular way of serving the Lasallian mission (a way of responding to the educational needs of the poor from the starting point of the Lasallian charism).

- To have one's own orbit in the system means to have the capacity, as a kindred group of people, to live and develop the Lasallian charisma in an integral way (in reference to the various aspects of a person, not to all the potentialities of the charism, which surpass each individual group). It is not simply a means of living a certain type of Lasallian spirituality, or a way of organizing itself as a community.
- An orbit of one's own is equivalent to a *global interpretation of the Lasallian charism* from a given identity, with the corresponding effect on the style of community life, on the spirituality, on the service to the mission... That is why, so as to establish that orbit officially and present it as a way of Christian life, it will be necessary to have the ecclesial recognition (cf III.3.2): first of all, from the Institute FSC which is the first guarantor of the Lasallian charism before the Church; then from the church authorities (diocesan/universal).
- The search by a group for its own orbit in the Lasallian Association, the constitution of a particular Lasallian identity and its maturing until achieving the institutional recognition, carries

with it a *tutorial phase* or accompaniment by another Lasallian group already established. At present it is normally the Institute FSC that will have to assume that tutorial role. It will have to be a respectful accompaniment - recognizing the difference of respective orbits - in which the protagonism and the autonomy of the group, which is being accompanied, must grow progressively. But it is based on discernment, and offering at the same time a charismatic contribution of quality or even prophetic denunciation when necessary.

### 3. Lasallian communities, where we encounter the mission

The model in gestation in this third phase, according to the option we offer, is an *Association of Lasallian institutions and groups* around the Lasallian mission. Its field of interpersonal meeting is that of *Lasallian Communities*, made up of different groups, each of them with their own identity; and, in places where there is one, the community of Brothers would be among them.

- 3.1 The accompanied vocational search, in view of a commitment with the Lasallian Association, can be carried out through an *intensive community experience*, for instance in a community of Brothers, which provides the knowledge and the experience of the Lasallian charism in its various dimensions. This type of experiences can be very fruitful under certain conditions:
  - The 1st and most important one is to respect the frame of experience, the community itself. The person who comes to have the experience finds a community with a life of its own, with a characteristic identity, with bonds with other communities, a membership, a relationship with the Institution. The community must not downplay this; rather they should present these characteristics with clarity to provide a significant experience of the Lasallian charism.
  - Besides, the person who carries out the experience must have the appropriate preparation to assimilate it. And finally, the conditions in which the person's insertion in the community is produced and the duration of the experience must be very well defined previously.



An example of this type of experience is that of a community that systematically welcomes volunteers who come to work for a few months, or a year in one of the educational works in service to the poor. The community needs to foresee a community program that allows these volunteers not just an opportunity for generous work, but also an experience of a ministerial community that carries out God's work (see 43rd General Chapter, Proposition 4).

- 3.2 A more common situation that needs to be encouraged is that of occasional or systematic participation in partial and concrete aspects of community life (Brothers or others Lasallian groups). In this case the person doesn't assimilate into the group identity but does want to benefit from community life to have a more intense experience of the Lasallian charism

- This might be the case with some teachers or catechists who don't have contact with a local lay community to share faith with and who desire to live the Lasallian charism in the framework of Association. The nearest community of Brothers could fill in the gap by offering them a certain level of participation, which could be more clearly defined after initial contact.

- 3.3 But the Church-communion as encouraged by the Second Vatican Council requires other new signs that Lasallian Association can and maybe ought to promote and which always have their beginning in the mission. These communities might be made up of people with diverse Lasallian identities: Brothers, married or single lay people, priests, This is no longer the case of a group of Brothers who have their own community program and who welcome other people provisionally into their community and their program. It is rather a *new heterogeneous community* whose members carry out together a *single community program* in function of their common mission. All maintain their proper identities as they serve that mission. The community does not erase the differences but rather encourages the complementarity of identities

- This type of community is not a model to be copied but a sign that reminds us of the need for communion for the mission among the diverse members of the Church that can be lived out in many different ways. They occupy a prophetic position in the District and they must maintain a strong and incontrovertible relation with

it. Brother who go to these communities are sent by their superiors rather than by their own volition. Obviously they may offer themselves or request to be sent there.

- The mission that motivates the community may be of different types. It may include District animation, Lasallian formation of educators, attention to an educational work for marginalized youth, or insertion in the social reality of poverty in order to carry out various facets of education... (cf 43rd General Chapter, Recommendation 18).

In any case, the urgent necessities of the mission must not relegate to second place, neither the internal life of the community nor the ongoing formation of its members.

### Questions for group reflection:

1. Many of the difficulties attendant on the way Brothers and lay partners understand Lasallian Association are the result of an insufficient sense of ecclesiology. We must stay abreast of the ecclesial framework of reference. What is our situation? Are we familiar with these concepts and images that express the identity of a Church-communion? Do we at least know some of the most representative post-conciliar documents that have something to say about ecclesiology such as *Evangelii nuntiandi*, *Christifideles laici*, and *Vita consecrata*?
2. In relation to Lasallian Association, what does the model of "planetary system" suggest to us? What important aspects does it help us to see more clearly and which others are less clear?
3. Are there community structures or practices that have to change so that this new Association can advance? Which ones? And at the District level?
4. We speak of diverse creations of "Lasallian communities." Do we know some of them in our Districts? Are there some of them we might promote?