

THE VOW OF ASSOCIATION: Realizing the Potential

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With a better understanding now of the implications of “shared mission” and the consequent renewed interest in various forms of association in the Institute for our Lasallian partners, it may be of some interest to ask about our vow of “association for the service of the poor through education,” What is it? and Why is it?

For an answer to these two questions, one could begin by reading the 1987 Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, which shows that the vow of association should have a pervasive influence on the life of a Brother and of the Institute. The Rule states that it is by association that the Brothers exercise their apostolic ministry of education in fidelity to the call of the Spirit and charism of the Founder (Art. 2); from the beginning of the Institute the Brothers in community have fulfilled their educational mission, especially to the young and poor who were far from salvation, “together and by association” (Art. 16, Art. 47); the vow of association forms part of the religious consecration of each Brother and is in the vow formula (Art. 24, Art. 25); by the vow of association the Brothers commit themselves to education for the poor (Art. 39, Art. 20) and the vow of association creates solidarity among the Brothers in support of the apostolic activity of the Institute (Art. 39a).

Thus, "association" has something to do with the three essential dimensions of the Brothers' life: consecration, mission, and community. But the 1987 Rule also indicates that association does not characterize only the Brothers' life and mission. The “spirit of association” is to be shared with our lay associates who wish to live according to the spirit of the Institute and to participate in its mission (Art. 17, Art. 146).

This same spirit of association, though the forms it takes may differ, should characterize the Lasallian Family.ⁱ "Together and by association" is an expression that is being utilized more and more within the Institute and among our Lasallian partners. Various forms of Lasallian associations are emerging now throughout the world and will probably continue to do so.

Is this broadening of the understanding of association an authentic unfolding of its potential, or is it simply baptizing an expediency due to a diminishing number of Brothers? Or, worse yet, does this broadening represent a deviation from the original intention?

It can safely be said, I believe, that having Lasallian associates is for most Brothers now quite normal, even useful, and some will admit, a blessing. This, of course, was not always the case. As has often been pointed out in recent years when speaking of shared mission, the 1897 General Chapter issued a statement calling for a reduction in number of "lay auxiliaries" and warning the Brothers to have but rare and very reserved relations with them.ⁱⁱ The 1946 Thirteenth General Chapter directed that the “feminine element” be urgently eliminated and the "civilian element” be prudently reduced. Furthermore, no new schools should be opened in a district where the civilian employees surpassed in number a certain proportion of the number of Brothers.ⁱⁱⁱ

While we can be thankful that these statements are in welcome obscurity in the archives of the Generalate in Rome, we can still ask what it means to move from rejecting Lasallian associates, to tolerating them, to accepting them, to welcoming them, and finally to inviting them gladly to join us in “association” (1987 Rule, Art. 17).

To try to shed some light on this matter, I will briefly indicate how fundamental the idea of association was in the minds of the Founder and the early Brothers and then suggest what was the essential meaning of association during this foundational period of the Institute.

Original Formulation of the Vow of Association

The vow of association was first pronounced at a time when the group of teachers founded by John Baptist de La Salle was in a precarious situation. Personal antagonisms, opposition to the Founder’s work, internal problems, and fragile health that almost led to his death toward the end of 1690 posed critical questions for De La Salle as to the very future of his enterprise. In this crisis, De La Salle decided to bind himself by vow with two other Brothers, Nicolas Vuyart and Gabriel Drolin,

to establish the Society of the Christian Schools at whatever the cost might be, even if all others should abandon it. This “vow of association and union” pronounced on November 21, 1691, often referred to as the “heroic vow”^{iv} was an act of hope at a time when the work of De La Salle and the early Brothers was in serious jeopardy.

Ten other Brothers pronounced this same vow on June 6, 1694 with De La Salle and his first two associates. The expression of the formula in 1691 “to procure with all our ability and efforts *the establishment of the Society of the Christian Schools*” becomes in 1694 “I promise and *vow to unite myself and to remain in Society.*” Because of the vow of association, the Society was now an incipient reality; it later became officially established with the Letters Patent of September 1724 and the Bull of Approbation of January 1725. Of the three who made the “heroic vow” thirty-four years earlier, only Brother Gabriel Drolin lived to see that courageous ambition fully realized.

The vow of association modified the structure of the group, which already had a private, temporary vow of obedience and a distinctive habit, reinforcing its cohesion. In fact, communities in Reims and in the surrounding region had existed for several years before the 1694 vow ceremony. A few years before, in his “*Mémoire sur l’habit,*”^v De La Salle claimed the right to call his small group of teachers a “community” with its attendant rights and privileges. Thus, the vow of association involves more than joining together in a community to work in a particular school. It situates the Brothers and the communities within the larger dimension of the Society.

That the early Brothers were conscious of this is seen by the fact that the word “Society” appears four times in the 1694 vow formula after the word “of association.”^{vi} At this first General Chapter of 1694 it was decided that the Brothers would take perpetual vows of obedience, stability in the Society, and association to conduct the gratuitous schools: “to keep together and by association gratuitous schools wherever they may be.” The formula of vows used on June 6, 1694 had a similar structure to that of the “heroic vow” in 1691: a) commitment to procure God's glory, b) statement of the purpose of the vow of association, c) mention of the vows pronounced (association, obedience, stability). This vow formula has served as the Institute pattern ever since. Note that commitment to association forms the center of the formula. The very structure of the formula points to the centrality of the vow of association.

The Election of June 7, 1694

That the vow of association was significant for the collective identity of the group was made clear on June 7, 1694, the day following the pronouncing of the perpetual vows. De La Salle proposed to those who had pronounced vows to elect one of their own as Superior of the Society. At first the Brothers would not hear of this, but they agreed to an election after De La Salle insisted. The results of the balloting were clear: De La Salle was unanimously elected Superior. A second balloting, at De La Salle's request, produced the same results. De La Salle accepted, but only after the Brothers signed a declaration stating that this election would not constitute a precedent for the future. In fact, the declaration prohibits the future election as Superior of a priest or of anyone not associated with the Brothers.

In addition to affirming the lay character and autonomy of the Society, the act of election constitutes a clear expression of the importance of association for the group. The election of De La Salle as Superior is a consequence of their association:

We, the undersigned [the names follow], after *associating* ourselves with John Baptist de La Salle ... declare that as a consequence of these vows and of the *association* which we have formed by them, we have chosen as our Superior John Baptist de la Salle ... and that we will not have or accept any Superior who has not *associated* himself with us, and has not made vows like us and like all those who *will be associated* with us in the future.^{vii}

The Letter of April 1, 1714

At the beginning of Lent in 1712, De La Salle, deprived of the right to teach and train teachers, betrayed by those in whom he had trusted, feeling abandoned by his Brothers, left Paris for the south of

France. During his prolonged journey of about two years the Brothers in Paris did not know where he was. Though he visited several communities in the south of France, he remained aloof and isolated, devoting himself to prayer and to writing or revising works for the use of the Brothers. He sought peace for a while at the hermitage of Parménie near Grenoble.

During this time matters worsened in Paris. The internal governance of the Society was unclear with Brother Barthélemy acting for the Superior. Efforts by the clergy to control the affairs of the Society increased. The Brothers needed guidance, and in desperation the principal Brothers of Paris, Versailles, and Saint Denis sent a respectful, but formal, letter to De La Salle ordering him in the name of the body of the Society to resume the general government of the Society.^{viii} This unusual step taken by the Brothers was an expression of the body of the Society, a body born of association.

The Meaning of Association

Twenty-three vow formulas pronounced from 1695 to 1705 have been preserved; although they contain slight variations, all, except the formulas for the Serving Brothers, link the vow of association with conducting gratuitous schools. Only a few formulas after 1705 and prior to August 15, 1725 (date of the Bull of Approbation) have survived; they also link the vow of association with running gratuitous schools.^{ix}

An explanation of the vows at this early stage can be found in a published text, the *Collection*, which clearly states the purpose of the vow of association: to conduct schools by association with those who are associated together in the Society and who will become associated in the future, in whatever place one may be sent.^x The schools, of course, were “gratuitous schools.”^{xi} Thus, from the very beginning gratuity was seen as essential to the Institute. Association and gratuity are the conditions necessary for the specific identity of the Society of the Christian Schools, independently of the other vows.

Association and Society

The vow of association is one that bears primarily upon the Society as a corporate body. The purpose of association is not primarily the running of a particular school by a given community of Brothers, but the promotion of gratuitous instruction throughout the Society. This is clear from the vow formula that utilizes the plural, “to keep together and by association *gratuitous schools*,” and makes the Brother available to “go wherever I may be sent.” The vow of association commits the Brother to the body of the Society before it commits him to a particular community and school.^{xii}

De La Salle wanted his schools to be accessible to all through an absolute gratuity –possibly the most decisive of his innovations. This gratuity was a principle he and the early Brothers fought courageously to maintain, and it remained a characteristic of the Lasallian schools during the eighteenth century. During the nineteenth century, after the French Revolution, gratuity was still considered essential, and where exceptions had to be made, indults were requested of the Holy See.

Association and Gratuity

Because the *raison d'être* of the vow of association was the principle of gratuity, it is necessary to see just what gratuity meant to De La Salle and the early Brothers. De La Salle founded the Society of the Christian Schools for the purpose of providing teachers for schools for poor and abandoned youth. The schools established by De La Salle made instruction available to those for whom the other schools were either closed or not adapted to their needs. Concern for the poor youth of his time was a constant preoccupation of De La Salle as he went about establishing schools. These schools were, for the most part, gratuitous elementary schools in cities and towns. At times, De La Salle provided for the twinning of a tuition school and a free school, of which one of the oldest and best-known types in the Institute dates back to Saint Yon.

Fundamental to De La Salle's view on association is the link between the call of the poor and abandoned youth and the response to that call through gratuitous schools. However, not just any type of gratuitous school would suffice. Even in the *Petites Écoles* or the *Écoles de Charité* the poor were often segregated from the others, or did not attend, because the curriculum was not suited to their needs. De La Salle's schools would be accessible to the poor and needy, characterized by gratuity for

all, by a curriculum adapted to the needs of the students, by being well run, and by being places where the Good News could be heard. All this could be done by the Brothers only "together and by association."

Interestingly, De La Salle did not make inability to pay a condition for acceptance into his schools. Many of De La Salle's legal problems with the masters of the *Petites Écoles* and the *Maîtres Écrivains* resulted from his refusal of their demands that he inquire into the economic situation of the families so that he could close the doors to the rich. To sort out the truly poor from those who could pay would throw into the streets children who, though not officially registered as poor in the parish records, were in families incapable of providing even the most elementary education because they lacked the means or the time to attend to their children.

Meaning of Gratuity

De La Salle wanted his schools to be a "means of salvation" for the poor and abandoned youth, a salvation by teaching them to be truly Christian, by freeing them from ignorance, and by making them useful in society. It meant making possible a decent life for them. These poor and abandoned youth will be changed from liabilities to the church and society to contributors to the good of the church and state.^{xiii}

"De La Salle makes it clear in his writings that gratuity expresses God's saving will for poor and abandoned youth. The gratuitous school reveals the mystery of a saving God at work. God comes through the establishment of gratuitous Christian schools to save unfortunate children whose temporal and eternal happiness is endangered by ignorance and idleness. For De La Salle, teaching gratuitously is both a gift to the Brothers of the goodness of God and a sign of God's gratuitous salvation for the student."^{xiv}

This theological dimension of gratuity, a sign of God's saving love, leads De La Salle to call upon the Brothers to say with Paul, "The source of my consolation is to announce the Gospel free of charge, without having it cost anything to those who hear me."^{xv} Both the preaching of the Gospel free of charge for salvation and having gratuitous schools for the poor and abandoned youth were seen by De La Salle as revealing the mystery of the saving God.

If gratuity is to express God's saving will for poor and abandoned youth, and if this is done in a special way through the school, then the school needs to be transformed so that it reaches the needy students. De La Salle accomplished this transformation. He adapted the schools to meet the students' needs. The spiritual inspiration behind gratuity stimulated pedagogical transformation.

Conclusion

The vow of association formally expresses a corporate commitment to make education accessible to the poor through gratuity of instruction. The vow aims to eliminate discrimination against students based on poverty and, paradoxically, even on the ability to pay for schooling.

The primary purpose of the vow of association, as has already been indicated, was not "to form community," or to run schools "together," in the sense that "together" means a particular community at a particular school. The Society was not born and defined by the need for a community of Brothers to teach in the same school, although at the beginning there was total identity between the religious fraternity and the school personnel. Rather, association was born in the call to answer the need of poor and abandoned youth for a suitable education. This response could be effective only in a system of gratuitous schools. Gratuity was the primary concern.

It is interesting to notice that the vow of association disappeared in the Bull of Approbation (1725), which mentions poverty, chastity, obedience, and *teaching gratuitously*. As a vow, association came back relatively recently. The General Chapter of 1966-1967 speaks of the "vow of association to keep gratuitous schools" and in the 1987 Rule it becomes "association for the service of the poor through education" (Art. 25). At the heart of the vow and spirit of association is concern for the poor and for the promotion of justice.

Service to the poor is an integral part of the promotion of justice, but this latter goes further. It is not content to help the poor; it seeks to fight against the forces which cause poverty and

injustice. This far-reaching view directs our educational work in keeping with the tradition coming from De La Salle and the early Brothers.

“Preferential Option for the Poor”

This expression in the 1987 Rule ^{xvi} has caused considerable anxiety in certain quarters of the Institute. Some see this insistence on preference for the poor as historically inaccurate for De La Salle opened the doors of his schools to poor and rich alike; some see it as inconsistent with the usual training of the Brothers for the apostolate and their vow of obedience to teach wherever they may be sent; still others see it as a call that cannot be ignored.

It is important to understand the expression. From a scriptural perspective “preferential option for the poor” is, first of all, a reality of faith, a theological truth. The God of the Jewish and Christian scriptures is the God of the poor who led Israel out of Egypt and who raised Jesus from the dead. The poor held a privileged position in the eyes of the God of Israel, ^{xvii} and poverty was the setting for the revelation of who God is in Jesus Christ and continued to be the social condition of the Word of God. The Gospel does not hesitate to identify Jesus with the poor: “Whatever you do to one of these, the least of my brethren, you do to me.” ^{xviii} The reign of God proclaimed by Jesus and realized in him was preferentially for the poor and the marginalized; indeed, the poor's hearing the Good News would be a sign of the presence of God's reign.” ^{xix}

To lose sight of the poor and the justice due them is to lose sight of the God of the Exodus and the Father revealed by Jesus. Faith gives the option for the poor its ultimate justification, for that option is rooted in the mystery of God. In final analysis, the option for the poor is based on theological reasons before anthropological and sociological ones. To opt for this God is to opt for the poor.

The model of the poor in the present historical context is no longer Lazarus in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man.^{xx} The poor, those deprived of the material goods necessary to live with dignity, are not primarily individuals in need of aid or communities needing economic development. Today the poor are collective victims of systems of oppression and discrimination in need of justice and liberation. In social terms poverty is oppression and dependence; in ethical terms it is injustice. The promotion of justice is the mediating term between the contemplation of God as a saving God and the option for the poor. The Institute, then, in emphasizing a “preferential option for the poor” is calling us to contemplate, as De La Salle did, the God of the Exodus and the Father revealed by Jesus. The promotion of justice must be the guiding principle of all our apostolic activity, whether it be with the poor or in institutions or situations where the poor are not the dominant culture. The effort is the same – liberation from oppression and injustice so as better to achieve service of the poor. To free humanity from every situation of oppression is the mission of the Church, for it is a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel.

The Institute option for preferential service to the poor--the ultimate meaning of the vow and spirit of association--is not some faddish or idiosyncratic apostolic thrust, but rather is embedded in the very understanding of God, of the Gospel, of the church, and of the charism of De La Salle. The danger, however, is to spiritualize the option. But authentic faith inevitably leads to works. Thus, the question of the concrete embodiments of this option is one of great importance. However, the purpose of this article is not to discuss the forms association has taken or may take in the Institute. The intention here is to suggest that for an association to take on the epithet "Lasallian" it must commit itself to the service of the poor through the promotion of justice. Only then can it claim fidelity to the spirit of association that inspired John Baptist de La Salle to found the Institute.

Could it be more than coincidental that the renewed Institute orientation toward social justice and the poor coincides with the emergence and promotion of various forms of Lasallian associations?

(This article is a revised and abridged version of the author's “The Vow of Association: Realizing the Potential” in *A Sense of the Future*, Christian Brothers Publications, 1990, 177-195)

ⁱ See the “Letter to the Lasallian Family” (Feb. 2, 1989) from the Brother Superior and General Council.

ⁱⁱ Thirteenth Session, March 26, 1897.

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- ⁱⁱⁱ Fifth Commission, 1946.
- ^{iv} The text of the vow can be found in *Cahiers lasalliens* 2:40.
- ^v The text can be found in *Cahiers lasalliens* 11:349-354.
- ^{vi} The vow formula can be found in *Cahiers lasalliens* 2:42.
- ^{vii} The text can be found in *Cahiers lasalliens* 2:43.
- ^{viii} The text of the Letter can be found in *Cahiers lasalliens* 2:68.
- ^{ix} See *Cahiers lasalliens* 3:19-23
- ^x See *Cahiers lasalliens* 3:61 (English translation in Lasallian Publications, *Collection of Various Short Treatises*, 3).
- ^{xi} See *Cahiers lasalliens* 2:70.
- ^{xii} The same can be said for the vow of stability.
- ^{xiii} See Meditation 160.3
- ^{xiv} See Meditation 194.1
- ^{xv} Ibid. I Cor 9:18
- ^{xvi} Art. 41; also see Arts. 40, 40a, 90, 3.
- ^{xvii} For example, see Book of Amos; also Psalm 72; Exodus 22; Jeremiah 22:1-5; Proverbs 14:31
- ^{xviii} Matthew 25:40
- ^{xix} Luke 4:7
- ^{xx} Luke 16:19-31
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