

“Lasallian Association and the Vow”.

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For some years now there has been extensive discussion on extending the traditional Lasallian concept of association to the lay and clerical partners of the Brothers. Some Brothers have difficulty with this proposal in view of the vow of association that has been a distinctive mark of the way the Brothers express their religious consecration. A brief survey of the history of association in the Institute in relation to the vow might help to clarify this difficulty.

Association before there was a vow

During the early years, as John Baptist de La Salle was becoming increasingly involved with the first schoolmasters in Reims, most of them recruited by Adrien Nyel, the reality of association was already present well before there was any thought of a vow. Whereas Nyel was satisfied to leave these unschooled schoolmasters to themselves and to follow the traditional model of the isolated teacher in a one-room school, De La Salle realized early on that if the work was to be effective or have a future a different approach was needed. He began by taking them into his home for meals, then had them live there. In this way he was able to provide them with some training and at the same time give them the opportunity to share their experiences in the classroom, to learn from their mistakes and to correct them. At first gradually and then totally he began to link his lot with theirs. He formed them into a community by becoming part of it himself.

Also from the beginning, the association in community had a parallel with association in the schools. The earliest gratuitous schools in Reims dating from 1679, in St. Maurice, St. Jacques, S. Symphorien, all were staffed by at least two Brothers working in tandem, teaching class simultaneously and in the vernacular. In this way they could both support and correct one another, bringing back to the table discussions in community their successes and failures. They could compare notes with their colleagues from other schools, and learn from the instruction and advice of the older, better educated, and wiser De la Salle. This was the beginning of the end of the tradition of the isolated schoolmaster in the charity schools making a living for himself by hearing the lessons of the pupils ones by one.

By the time the Brothers assembled in 1684 to discuss what they had achieved and where they were headed, De La Salle had already renounced his ecclesiastical title of canon, his personal wealth, and his family connections to devote himself to the little community that would soon describe itself as a society. A major factor in the success of the schools was their policy of conducting the gratuitous schools by association. In an assembly held probably in 1684 this became a rule. A major test of this policy came when tempting offers began to arrive from country pastors willing to support a single Brother in a rural school. Rather than yield on the principle of association, De La Salle opened a teacher training center in Reims where the rural pastors could send a single candidate to be trained in the Brothers' methods and then returned to run the parish school by himself.

Also in that 1684 assembly the men who had been associated as teachers decided to call themselves and to be known as Brothers rather than schoolmasters to underscore their commitment to one another. At the same time the question arose as to how to solidify the association that had brought them a modicum of success. Lacking any kind of legal

protection, whether civil or ecclesiastical, they decided to turn to God and bind themselves to God by a vow of obedience, making themselves available to serve as needed in the gratuitous schools conducted by association.

The origins of the vow of association

As the Brothers expanded their work from Reims to Paris, they brought with them their tradition of association, gratuity, discipline, and effective teaching. But they soon ran into trouble. The pastor of the parish wanted to interfere with the running of the community and tried to change the religious habit the Brothers wore. Some Brothers abandoned their vocation. The Brother that De La Salle sent to study for the priesthood, and who was being groomed to succeed him as Superior, suddenly died. Then De La Salle himself became gravely ill and almost died. It looked as if the whole enterprise might collapse.

Once he was sufficiently recovered, De La Salle realized that he had been mistaken in preparing a single Brother to replace him as Superior. He also realized that the future of his Society should not depend on himself alone. His solution was to apply the principle of association to the leadership that would put the Society on a solid foundation. Choosing two of his most competent and trusted Brothers, together with them in 1691 he made a vow of “association and union to procure and maintain the establishment” of the Society, even if they would be the only three to remain and if they would have to beg and live on bread alone. Known as the “heroic vow,” this first vow of association had its intended effect. Programs were put in place for the physical and spiritual renewal of the Brothers and a novitiate was opened that soon provided a steady supply of new members. By 1694 the situation was stable enough to develop a formal set of Rules and to invite selected Brothers to consider making perpetual vows.

In an assembly in that year, 1694, ever since considered as the first General Chapter of the Institute, twelve Brothers made perpetual vows for the first time. These vows were not the traditional vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience but rather three vows all directed to the educational mission. The central vow was “to keep together and by association gratuitous schools.” This was supported by vows of obedience to the body of the Society and stability in the Society, designed to provide permanence and flexibility to the association. At first glance, the expression “to keep together and by association” seems tautological, but perhaps a certain progression was intended. Not only was each school conducted by two or more Brothers acting in concert (i.e. together) but they did so “by association,” as part of a larger society or network of schools. Not all the Brothers were required to take vows, but these were the only vows made by the Brothers during the Founder’s lifetime and for some few years thereafter.

The vow of association is changed

After the death of the Founder in 1719, the Brothers undertook to seek from church authorities in Rome formal approval for their Society as a religious institute (not a religious order). In the negotiations for the Bull of Approbation, granted in 1725 by Pope Benedict XIII, it seems that the Brothers themselves wanted to add the three traditional vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. In the process also, the vow of association was reinterpreted and changed to a vow of teaching gratuitously. Although the reference to “together and by association” was preserved in the second paragraph of the vow formula, the two “special vows” as they came to be known were formally designated as teaching gratuitously and stability.

The vow of teaching gratuitously had a rocky history. For one thing, those who entered the Society as serving Brothers did not take the vow. There was discrepancy between the vow formula (“teaching gratuitously”) and the language of the Bull (“teaching the poor gratuitously”).

Especially after the French Revolution, as the Institute expanded to new cultural and economic situations, absolute gratuity became increasingly problematic. Questions arose: What was the object of the vow? teaching? gratuity? or both? Who were bound by the Vow? the individual Brother? the Community? the Institute? Did the vow apply to all schools or only those where the pupils were “poor”? Who indeed are the poor? The result was a long series of interpretations, rescripts and dispensations from superiors and the authorities in Rome during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to solve problems of policy and conscience.

It is no wonder then that in the renewal Thirty-ninth General Chapter of 1966-1967 there was a move to get rid of the two special vows altogether. Motivation was supplied by the widespread accommodation in the Institute to the homogenization of religious life centered on the three traditional vows, the so-called “evangelical counsels,” promoted by the Vatican authorities. But the Chapter took a different tack. Vatican Council II had directed that religious institutes renew themselves in the light of the Gospel, the signs of the times, and the charism of the Founder. Realizing that the Founder’s charism was notably embodied in the vow of 1694, the Chapter decided to renew and reinterpret the two special vows rather than to eliminate them. Accordingly, the vow of teaching the poor gratuitously was changed to a vow of “service of the poor through education.” This was seen as support for the new emphasis given by the Chapter to the direct and indirect educational service of the poor. It was a step in a new direction.

The recovery of the vow of association

The confusion in the Church generally and in religious life in particular that followed the in the years after Vatican II and the renewal chapters led the Institute of the Brothers to establish an international committee to deal with questions that had arisen concerning the vows. The committee, headed by Brother Michel Sauvage and composed of Brothers from various parts of the Institute, met annually from 1972 to 1975. The specific mandate was to address the problems related to temporary vows and the alternative of promises introduced after the Council, as also the objections being raised to the obligatory perpetual vows. The committee did not limit itself to these structural issues, but spent considerable time addressing the broader biblical, theological, historical and canonical implications of the vow structure. Considerable attention was paid to the role and the meaning of the vows at the origin of the Institute. Out of this discussion, the importance of association as central to the Founder’s charism came to the surface. Among other recommendations, at the end of its report, the committee thought that it might be time to renew the vow of association and even went so far as to suggest that it might indeed become the only vow, or at least the hermeneutical principle to understand the other vows.

Unfortunately at the time, the Institute’s central government was seriously divided. The Brother Assistants who were most resistant to change viewed the work of the committee as an attack on the traditional religious life. They interpreted the report as a move to eliminate the demands of poverty, chastity and obedience, and so to secularize the Institute. When the report was circulated in the United States, there was in the New York District a concerted effort to repudiate the work of the committee by position papers drawn up in opposition.

There were objections from elsewhere in the Institute as well. Although the proposal on association was only a small part at the very end of the report, it seems that the idea of association that held the Institute together from the beginning had been turned into a force for division. In any case, the report was presented to the Fortieth General Chapter in 1976 but the chapter committee entrusted with the vows had too many other problems to deal with and the vow of association was not addressed.

The climate was very different as preparations were underway for the Forty-first General Chapter to be held in 1986. The principal business of the Chapter was to prepare and endorse a new Rule for the Institute to be presented to the Vatican for definitive approval. To this end, a new international committee was formed to prepare, in conjunction with the General Council, fortunately no longer divisive, a draft text for the definitive Rule. One concern of the committee was to reintroduce into the Rule as many specific references to the Founder and his vision as possible in order to make the new Rule distinctively Lasallian. That is why, when it came to the section of the Rule dealing with the special vows, the committee saw the opportunity to include association in the vow for the service of the poor through education. The General Council agreed in 1985; the General Chapter voted in favor in 1986, the Vatican approved in 1987, and ever since the fourth vow of the Brothers has been the vow of “association for the service of the poor through education.”

The significance of the fourth vow has now been affirmed in the December 2003 pastoral letter of Brother Alvaro, Superior General. In addition to giving a history of the vow, much of which is repeated above, he puts special emphasis on the service of the poor and the work for social justice as the major thrust of the vow for the Brothers. As the vow committee in 1975 had already suggested, he proposes that the fourth vow of association be a way for the Brothers to interpret and to live each of the other vows. Although most of the pastoral is directed to the Brothers, the Superior also describes how their association for the service of the poor is and can be shared with the lay partners based on an ecclesiology of communion.

Association extended to the laity

The renewed understanding of the importance for the Brothers of the vow of association comes at a time when the Institute has been developing an interest and indeed an enthusiasm for sharing with lay and clerical partners the charism of association for the educational mission. This movement to recognize the permanent role of lay associates, first affirmed in the *Declaration* voted by the Thirty-ninth General Chapter in 1967, has been a major preoccupation and has intensified in all the general chapters since.

Although this movement has raised among some Brothers questions concerning their identity, in another sense it had served to heighten an awareness of how the vowed Brother is different.. It is not the “material content” of the vows that constitute identity. After all, many lay persons are poor and find it harder sometimes than the Brothers to make ends meet, some lay persons are celibate, and most live under structures of obedience in the workplace and in the home. If poverty, chastity, and obedience can be shared, so also can association for the Lasallian mission, Lasallian spirituality and even community on occasion. But the primary relational context and lifestyle for the vowed Brother lies in his religious community; for the lay associates, the primary relational context remains the family, the residence, or other such associations.

Conclusion

The history just reviewed reveals various ways in which Lasallian association and the vow of association are related. The first thing to note is that association has never been an end in itself; Lasallian association is always association for the mission of education in the service of the poor. Association for this mission existed before the Brothers took such a vow, it continued to be the reality from 1725 until 1986 when that specific vow was suppressed, it took on new life when the vow was restored, and now has a life and meaning in tandem with the vow but different from it in the way it functions in the mission. In short, Brothers are associated by vow with Brothers for the Lasallian mission; Brothers are also associated in various ways and in varying degrees with persons who are not Brothers for the sake of the same mission..

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