

## **Lasallian Identity**

### **Five Documents for a Workshop**

Secretariat for Lasallian Associates (2004)

The Journey of the Lasallian Community (Gerard Rummery, FSC)

The Change of Age and Its Signs (Robert Comte, FSC)

The Challenge of Mission: Reinventing the Educational Community  
(Pedro Gil, FSC)

The Challenge of Belonging (Bruno Alpago, FSC)

Lasallian Spirituality and Association (Michael F. Meister, FSC)

Conclusion. Lasallian Identity Today: A Differentiated Identity  
(Robert Comte, FSC)

### **Presentation**

In June 2002, the International Lasallian Commission Associated for the Educational service of the Poor, with the agreement of Brother Superior and his Council, gathered five Lasallian experts and entrusted them with presenting a document on Lasallian Identity. The global perspective of the document would have to be the new and complex reality of Lasallian Association, while at the same time it should contribute to make clearer the specific identity of the Brother, according to Proposition 17 of the 43rd General Chapter in the year 2000.

The five experts, Brothers Bruno Alpago (Argentina), Robert Comte (France), Pedro Gil (Spain), Michael Meister (USA/Toronto) and Gerard Rummery (Australia), coming from different languages and cultures, worked for more than a year and a half through three face-to-face meetings of varying lengths and for the rest of the time by making frequent contact by e-mail.

First of all, they let themselves be challenged by the questions proposed by the Commission and their expressed expectations with regard to the document. As they continued, they had to agree among themselves on the ways they would direct their reflection:

Two central nuclei which cast light on one another: Identity and Association;

A transversal axis, that of the Community. The Community would not be a separate chapter apart from the rest but rather the perspective from which Lasallian identity would be configured, the axis that crossed other elements - Mission, Consecration, Spirituality - and fills them with the Lasallian charism;

Preferably a narrative reading which recovers the importance of our "founding myth" (the beginnings of our story) as a source of light for the whole Lasallian journey and the life-giving root of our collective Lasallian identity. At the same time, a reading that was attentive to the signs of the times and the changes produced today, because that identity follows history but does not repeat it;

Those for whom the document was intended would be a very varied group of persons who recognize one another in their collective Lasallian identity. Among them would be those who do not directly share the Christian faith but the Lasallian charism overflows the boundaries of the official Church as institution. The document would need to maintain the tension between two poles: fidelity to the Gospel and to the Person of Jesus, who is at the heart of Lasallian identity, and the recognition of the action of the Holy Spirit through other religious traditions. The language would have to be sufficiently understandable and inclusive, while indicating what was specific to one or other form of Lasallian identity, and specifically that of the Brother.

Producing successive working copies of the document was achieved through a continuing dialogue, by allowing each viewpoint to be challenged by the viewpoint of others and by reactions that came from outside the group.

The text here presented is not yet a definitive document. The intention of the authors and of the Commission is to offer the Lasallian world "points for a workshop". In fact, the proposal is to put into operation multiple workshops in which different Lasallian identities take part, either in homogenous or in varied groups. The authors of these "points" suggest at the end of each chapter a series of questions to direct the reflection. But it is important to follow in a methodical way the process followed by the authors:

- First of all, it is necessary to give ample time, without any rush, to reflect, listen and share...It would be particularly valuable if the workshops were of several days in which living together and prayer were the common foundation for reflection.
- Later there is a need to become aware of the questions and lack of clarity among ourselves, in our surroundings, our culture and the signs of the times we are living.
- Throughout the reflection, we need to be aware of the central axes, the emphases, the things that ensure continuity and progression in identity, the sources of life... For that there is a need to have recourse to the rich documentation we have inherited, beginning from the Founder's writings.
- In sharing our conclusions and discoveries with other groups, let us listen to their insights, note the different emphases, distinguish between what is common and what is specific to groups or cultures.
- In thinking about arriving at a final consensus document on Lasallian identity, what would we change in what is offered? What would we add?

Please send your results, big or small, to the Secretariat for Lasallian Associates at the address: [abotana@lasalle.org](mailto:abotana@lasalle.org)

Brother Antonio Botana

## **The Journey of the Lasallian Community**

Gerard Rummery, FSC

All Lasallian educational works throughout the world today trace their origin to Saint John Baptist de La Salle (1651-1719) and the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools of which he was the founder. His work comes at the beginning of what we call Modernity as the France he knew saw the movement of so many people away from the countryside into the rapidly developing cities. De La Salle and his Brothers' concern for the education of the urban poor develops against the background of the highest point of French civilization at the Court of Louis XIV.

What was the dynamic force of this foundation that enabled it to survive its suppression in the country of its origin in 1792, its reinstatement in 1803 and its eventual spread into all the continents so that 96% of those associated in this movement today are not members of the Brotherhood as such but see themselves in different ways as sharers in the same Lasallian heritage?

The following text traces the continuity between the founding vision and the vitality of the Lasallian movement today.

### 1. De La Salle's own journey to the priesthood

The journey of the first community of the Brothers of the Christian Schools begins with the personal journey of John-Baptist de La Salle and only later becomes that of the schoolmasters. The young Canon, whose administrative competence and self-assurance had been proven between 1672 and 1678 became, unwittingly as his own words indicate, associated by vow with a group of men whom he initially ranked below the social level of his own personal servant. Before concentrating on the events following his meeting with Adrien Nyel in 1679, it is important to take into account the journey which the young La Salle had made especially through personal suffering and the taking on of family responsibilities between 1672 and 1678.

The biographers tell us of the death of his mother on 19th July 1671 and of the death of his father on 9th April 1672. The young Jean-Baptist was not present for either of these funerals. His mother had been buried for almost two weeks before he arrived in Reims to meet his sorrowing father and his sisters and brothers. Only 9 months later there followed his father's death. We know

that John-Baptist made the Holy Week retreat at Saint-Sulpice before terminating his studies and his residence in Paris so that it was only two weeks later that he returned to Reims to take up his duties as administrator of his father's estate. Thanks to the detailed research of Léon Aroz in *Cahiers lasalliens* Nos. 26 - 32 we now know so much about how he lived these years between 1672 and 1678 but we can only guess at his personal grief and sense of loss. With the advantage of hindsight, however, we can easily see just how much his personal faith grew and was strengthened through these years of his family administration.

## 2. A tension to be solved

First, there must have been the tension between his personal path towards the priesthood and his new duties as administrator. If he initially resumed his theological studies in May only some weeks after returning to Reims and received the sub-diaconate in early June at Cambrai, by October he had to postpone his studies because of his administrative obligations. This sense of fidelity to his overriding duty as administrator, however, never allowed him to lose sight of the goal of priesthood to which he felt himself called.

Second, we can only guess at the enduring influence of Saint-Sulpice throughout his lifetime, shown especially in the importance he accorded to the presence of God in his later writings and meditations on interior prayer (*oraison*) and, at a moment of crisis in 1691, to an obvious imitation of Jean-Jacques Olier and his two companions in the content and manner of the "heroic vow" of that year. Was it, perhaps, through submission to his spiritual director at Saint-Sulpice in discerning the will of God that he was later to forge so special a relationship with Nicolas Roland, his spiritual director? Even though Roland's urging that he resign his canonry came to nothing because of the change of mind of the parish priest, it may have been an important lesson in understanding the force of hierarchical pressure to maintain the status quo, something John Baptist would experience many more times in his lifetime. Named executor of Roland's will, De La Salle succeeded in obtaining recognition for the Sisters of the Child Jesus. Thus it was that in following out his new path in relationship to these Sisters he first came to know Adrien Nyel, to consult Nicolas Barré and, in following Barré's advice, to become the leader of Nyel's group of schoolmasters.

## 3. Fidelity to the will of God

The autobiographical Memoir of the Beginnings leaves us in no doubt that the unexpected meeting with Adrien Nyel early in 1679 had consequences which became an important test of De La Salle's fidelity. It is difficult not to feel that on numerous occasions up to 6th June 1694, De La Salle seemed to see his task as bringing some stability to this new community which he found himself creating almost in spite of himself but which he did not envisage as his life's work. His various attempts to allow the members to decide their own future as a community of laymen with their own autonomy under a lay superior can certainly give the impression that it was only in 1694 that he saw that God was calling him to make perpetual vows as one of them. Indeed, the very dating of the Memoir ["some fourteen years after"] suggests that by June 1694 De La Salle had come to see that his task of helping to stabilise this community from the outside was no longer sufficient. The same spirit of faith which had brought him to this moment, now led him to vow the rest of his life to this task.

Fidelity for De La Salle, then, was not following out some predetermined path trodden beforehand by others. It was rather the recognition that the Spirit of God was actively calling him through the events and challenges of his present situation to a fidelity to a future which was in no way certain or secure except by complete openness to this "God who is so good..."

#### 4. Journeying with the spirit of faith

In his 18 months at Saint-Sulpice, the young De La Salle seems to have understood and accepted one of the characteristics of the spirituality of 17th century France with regard to Christian discipleship. This was not so much the 'following' or even the 'imitation' of Christ and the following of Christ's example but, in a more profound sense the way in which Christ was to live in us. The very invocation which later became the watchword and signal of the community- "Live Jesus in our hearts!" Forever!" was a constant prayer of the community members for one another. It is striking to note how often in his Method of Interior Prayer, De La Salle invokes the text from Galatians 2.20 "It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me" as the interior disposition to which faith should lead us.

"Seeing everything with the eyes of faith", as he was later to write in the Collection, enabled him to be faithful in spite of many severe disappointments. There was the intense disappointment he must have felt when many of the original

teachers left him. There was the dramatic reversal of roles when, after he had recalled Scripture to show the importance of reliance on God's providence to the new teachers, they were able to show him the contrast between his own security in life and the Gospel counsel he was offering! His administrator's experience of how money could be used to endow the schools was rejected by a Barré who asked him, instead of endowing the schools himself, to give away his personal fortune and to rely on God's providence. Barré's greatest gift to De La Salle may have been to help him see that the salvation of the young people would not come about from the hierarchical structure of the Church and society of the time but from the way that the mission of Christ would be carried out through this new lay community that ensured the continuity of the gratuitous schools.

It is not surprising, then, that De La Salle gave the spirit of faith as the foundation spirit for those who were to live in this community. His approach was not a vague abstraction but involved "seeing and judging" events in the light of faith and even, daringly, trying to see as God sees. He saw also that this faith was authentic to the extent that it found expression through what he was to call "an ardent zeal." Was it, perhaps, through his own closeness as confessor and guide to his first followers that the untimely deaths of Brothers Jean-François, Nicolas Bourlette, Jean Morice and Henri L'Heureux in the first years of the community deepened his conviction of the importance of faith and its expression through zeal as fundamental to the work of the schools and strengthened his growing perception that the work of the Christian schools was indeed "God's work"? A spirit of faith expressed through zeal was essential but it is significant that De La Salle's achievement, as Michel Sauvage notes in *Catéchèse et Laiçat*, was his insistence that the journey of faith was not to be made alone but was to be sustained through membership of a community.

##### 5. Membership of a community

If we assume that the first Assembly at Reims was indeed from Ascension to Trinity 1686, then it is here that we can trace some of the essential elements which consolidated membership in the community by decisions about various external signs of belonging. After requesting De La Salle to take over the schools in Laon and Guise, Nyel had returned to Rouen in the summer of 1685. Whereas Blain's reporting of this Assembly stresses De La Salle's humility in allowing the members to express their own opinion about the matters to be discussed, modern commentators on the same facts emphasise how important it was for De La Salle

to allow each person to speak for himself since they were the ones choosing to make the transition from being an ad hoc group to becoming a new kind of community with its own special mission.

The decision to wear a distinctive habit was a visible sign of membership of a community. More important and fundamental to the whole process was the decision to put aside the name of 'schoolmaster' and to adopt the title of Brother, especially the double sense of definition given to the expression by defining themselves as 'brothers to one another' in the community and 'older brothers' to the young people confided to their care. De La Salle allowed some members to take a vow of obedience for three years, renewable each year, but it is important to see that this was a personal option and in no way constitutive of the community. It may well be that the habit and the name both came from De La Salle's seeking advice from Barré, whose 'brothers' never succeeded as did the 'sisters' he founded, possibly because Barré, himself a Minim, never lived in community with his Brothers. Indeed, this 'new' community of men who were neither clerics nor formally 'religious' in the then contemporary sense, were soon viewed askance from a clerical point of view, especially when it became known that De La Salle, former Canon of Reims, was practising obedience to the lay superior of the community, Henri L'Heureux!

This transformation of the individual schoolmasters into a community did not happen at one moment but could be thought of as the crossroads where De La Salle's own journey intersected with the hesitant steps of the former 'schoolmasters'. What bound the members of the community together were not the traditional bonds of a religious community i.e. habit, vows and an officially approved rule of life, but rather the willingness of a group of laymen to associate themselves, to put everything in common and to live together under agreed regulations in order to assure the continuity of the gratuitous schools founded for the Christian education of poor boys in Reims and its environs. Commitment was expressed through the willingness and availability of all the members to continue the work that had been begun. If De La Salle allowed some to make vows it was to accommodate their own preference and devotion. The common mission would be served by all, with or without vows.

## 6. The journey from Reims to Paris

The physical displacement from Reims to Paris in 1688 was another milestone in the life of the community. First of all, De



La Salle, who had successfully obtained ecclesiastical and civil approval and an assured future for Roland's Sisters of the Child Jesus, was not prepared to accept the same offer of approval and patronage from the archbishop of Reims. In the absence of any stated reasons for this refusal, we can surmise at least that De La Salle did not feel that the little group had yet found its own identity or stability as events in Paris were soon to prove. The Memoir on the Habit was another important step in insisting on this sense of a 'community' noted by the first biographers as early as 1681-1682, and referred to by De La Salle himself in the same year in his letter to the authorities of Château-Porcien. The members may have lived in a number of separate 'houses' but saw themselves as forming one community.

The importance of the 'heroic vow' of 21st November 1691 was that it had a precise objective not previously formulated so explicitly: the foundation of the society. The objective of the heroic vow had been achieved when on 6th June 1694, De La Salle and 12 Brothers pronounced vows of association, obedience and stability for life. The importance of their vow of association was it bound the members together in view of a common mission, the continuation of the Christian and gratuitous schools. If the community had the external appearance of a 'religious' community its novelty was that it differed in very significant ways. Instead of being like existing communities in which the monastic vows of poverty, chastity and obedience were fundamental in creating the basis on which some external mission could be carried out, the members of this new community first associated themselves to live under regulations in this community in order to continue the Christian and gratuitous schools. Some would confirm this choice by making vows, but others would serve the community without anyone being obliged to do so.

#### 7. The social function of that first Association

Eleven years before the 'heroic vow' of association of 21st November 1691, De La Salle had already shown himself ready to 'associate' himself closely with persons from a lower social status. His biographers are at one in telling how natural it was for De La Salle to invite Nyel and his pupil-teacher to his own home while the initial arrangements for the first school were made. When the school at Saint-Maurice was opened in April 1679, Nyel and the first teachers lodged with the parish priest. This arrangement having proved to be unsatisfactory, at Christmas 1679 De La Salle lodged them behind Saint-Symphorien. This situation also proving unsatisfactory, in June 1681 De La Salle took them into his own home in Rue Sainte-Marguerite. The clash

with his close and extended family shows how far he was prepared to go to ensure the success of the schools which he had come to see was inseparable from the formation of the schoolmasters themselves. This clash of persons from two widely separated levels of society could not have been unforeseen but De La Salle's attempt to make it work is perhaps a measure of his growing conviction of the importance of the journey he was willing to undertake to have these schools succeed.

The reaction in both family and ecclesiastical circles in Reims to De La Salle's living as a simple member of a lay community with a lay superior showed the strength of the prevailing social system. Léon Aroz in Cahiers lasalliens No. 52 has helped our understanding of the family conflict culminating in the lawsuit brought by his brother in law, Jean Maillefer, husband of Marie de La Salle, which eventually led to De La Salle and the schoolmasters moving to Rue Neuve in 1682.

Perhaps it is only in taking a long view from the first meeting with Adrien Nyel in early 1679 to his death at Saint-Yon in 1719 that we can appreciate the importance of the social distance De La Salle himself travelled in moving from a position of patronage to one of service and in the process becoming God's chosen instrument in bringing into being a lay community which was to outlast him and continue the mission of Christian and gratuitous education which he launched. But it is important not to so emphasise De La Salle's journey that we underestimate the journey made by the community of which he was the founder. The men who accepted De La Salle's leadership and guidance did so without the solid theological background and spiritual formation which had enriched him but were willing to undertake this journey with him as leader. They, too, were led by faith along a new path in the Church.

#### 8. The crisis of 1707-1714

After the loss of the court case brought against him by the writing masters and the formal condemnation by name on 29th August 1704, not only of De La Salle but also of some 18 Brothers, the journey of De La Salle and the novices continued to Rouen while the named Brothers, who could no longer teach in Paris, were dispersed to Chartres, Dijon and Rouen. Success in overcoming difficulties in Rouen gradually brought some stability to the community, but the unfavourable judgement against De La Salle in the prolonged Clément affair which had dragged on from 1707 to 1712, eventually led De La Salle to

visit the communities in the south of France so as to distance himself from bringing further difficulties on his community.

The story of De La Salle's 30 months absence from Paris appears only through some isolated details. If the original plan was simply to remove himself from Paris so as not to bring further difficulties on his community, a series of disappointments seemed to have convinced him that his very association with the Brothers was itself the source of their difficulties. Whatever consolations De La Salle may have received at Grenoble, it is the image of the doctor of theology seeking counsel from the unlettered shepherdess Sister Louise that is most striking. The letter of the "principal Brothers" at Easter 1714 marks a new stage of the community's journey because of its clarity in appealing to De La Salle's act of association with them on June 6th 1694 as the basis by which his community could insist on his return: the authors of the letter had indeed absorbed his teaching!

#### 9. The importance of the Common Rules of 1717-18

The clear understanding of the importance of association is shown as well in that for the decision to hold a General Chapter in 1717 to be approved, Brother Barthélemy visited most of the communities in order to obtain the signature of each Brother as a sign of agreement. The Lasallian community had some 25 years of experience when De La Salle first formulated a set of Common Rules in 1705, even though the biographers speak of Rules written in the early part of 1694 and the Memoir on the Habit speaks of the members living according to Rules. Now, at the end of his life, when the Brothers were at last ready to name as his successor one of their own, De La Salle put the finishing touches to the Common Rules, based on the lived experience of the community since its origins. It is most significant, therefore, that this 'final' version approved by the delegates at the General Chapter at Rouen was then sent to each community by Brother Barthélemy to replace the Rule previously in force.

#### 10. Brother Agathon's fidelity to the journey

The 100 Brothers of 1719 had become almost 900 by 1789. Increasingly after the mid-century, the Brothers came into conflict with the philosophes, the proponents of the Enlightenment. Since 1725 the Institute had been officially approved by the Church through being granted its own Bull of Approbation. While this official approval of both Church and State had helped the Institute to develop, it now did so as a

religious congregation and, in the theology of religious life of the time, lived with the ambiguity of the two aims of their semi-monastic style of life, namely the Brothers' search for perfection in seeking their own salvation and the at times apparently contrary demand of being "from morning to night with their pupils." It is easier for the historian to see better than Brother Agathon and his Council that the Brothers were in danger of losing the essential link between their consecration, their community and their mission. Nevertheless, Brother Agathon's leadership through his writings from 1777-1792 witnesses to his fidelity to the founding vision as he struggled to maintain the foundation principles of gratuity, the 'principal duty' of the Brother as catechist, the development of the list of The Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher left by De La Salle into an important book, the updating of The Conduct of Schools to meet new needs and his spirited defence against the suppression of the Institute by the National Assembly. Even though the Institute formally ceased to exist after 1792 in the land of its foundation, the fact that there was already an established community in Lyon in 1803 which was soon followed by the arrival of Brother Frumence as Vicar-General in 1805 is its own tribute to its solid foundations. Hampered in many ways by its controlled status under the university throughout the 19th century, the Institute nevertheless showed great creativity and became missionary in a way which its founder could never have envisaged.

#### 11. Fidelity in the crisis of 1904

By the end of the 19th century, the growth of the Institute outside of France presented particular difficulties. One was that, as the founding charism became institutionalised through its centralised forms of government, there was a tendency towards uniformity as a value in itself with the failure to recognise the very different cultural circumstances under which the Brothers were working. This was particularly so in the difficulties encountered in trying to maintain the principle of gratuity when the Brothers had to operate boarding schools to have some financial security. Responding in this way seemed to question the identity of the Brothers as entrusted with "the children of artisans and the poor." This insistence on uniformity and a literal fidelity to the Rule (notably in the rigid interpretation of the prohibition against the teaching of Latin) threatened the development of new ways of responding to the serving the needs of the poor. The changing circumstances required as well that there was need for better formation of the Brothers themselves.

The secularization laws in France in 1904 presented the French Brothers of the time with a dilemma: was it possible to be faithful to the founding vision if a Brother could no longer continue to live in the Institute with the traditional 'separation from the world', religious name and habit, support of community life and all the other aspects which had always been present, or was it better to go into exile to maintain the life of the Institute in a foreign country? From our vantage point a century later, it is possible to see that the 'secularized' Brothers and those who went into exile were both faithful as, on one hand, the unjust laws became the providential instrument for the further international dispersion of the Institute, already launched through its missionary outreach in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and, on the other, the 'secularized' Brothers maintained their presence in a creative way and were largely responsible for preserving what they could until the laws were repealed.

## 12. The meaning of re-foundation

There is a profound sense in which every new opening since the first school in Saint-Maurice in 1679 has been a re-foundation because the same underlying principles of the Lasallian heritage have led to its creation. Among these principles there would have to be included the following four:

- the foundation is a response in the spirit of the Gospel to the particular needs of those to be served
- those responsible for the work are associated together in what they see as a common enterprise and are prepared to work together to achieve its ends;
- the basis of relationships, among those who serve as well as among those being served, is that of being "brothers/sisters to one another and older brothers/sisters to those served";
- a profound sense of gratuity, material and spiritual, characterises the policies of the foundation.

If the above principles are considered indispensable for the foundation itself, it is no less important that periodic evaluation ensure that they are maintained and upheld especially if the original foundation is required to change because of outside circumstances. If such an evaluation were to show that some or all of the original principles were no longer operative, fidelity to the heritage would make it imperative to try to implement the same foundational principles in the new situation.

From an historical viewpoint, each District has had local responsibility for monitoring the Lasallian character of its foundations while the General Chapters of the Institute have had periodic evaluations of policy from an international perspective. The recognition by the General Chapters of 1976, 1986 and 1993 that the mission is now 'shared' with lay persons as the majority of participants has brought a certain urgency to the propositions of the General Chapter of 2000 in its call for more widespread participation of representative lay persons in policy-making as regards the Lasallian mission. In whatever ways this may be implemented, fidelity to the heritage requires that all persons called on to help make and implement such policy decisions need formation in understanding the foundation principles and in being prepared to support them.

For your continuing reflection and sharing

How has your particular life-journey intersected with that of the Lasallian Community?

What strikes you most about this overview of the journey of the Lasallian Community? What, in your opinion, are the important 'values' which have enabled the Lasallian work to grow, survive, and remain relevant in so many different parts of the world today?

Do you find the four principles of "re-foundation" [§12] applicable in the Lasallian work [mission?] to which you contribute? If so, indicate how this is so. If not, what more do you feel needs to be done?

## **The Change of Age and Its Signs**

Robert Comte, FSC

Why do we need to reflect on the changes taking place around us? Because, for us, reading the signs of the times has made us who we are and it would be simply irrelevant for us to invoke the Lasallian charism in a timeless manner. It was in being attentive to the signs of the times that the authors of the Declaration knew how to address a life-giving message in the aftermath of Vatican II (General Chapter (1966-67)). It is in being attentive to the signs of our times that we will have some way of finding new ways for incarnating the Lasallian charism.

It would certainly be rash to attempt to describe in a few pages the major trends of the recent evolution of our society. The process involved is very complex, and we are too much part of what is happening to be able to discern its full impact. In addition, to be able to speak about it we cannot remove ourselves from our own situation. Someone from the west will not say the same as would someone from Africa or from Asia. For example, the western debates about modernity or post-modernity are not necessarily relevant elsewhere. Finally, there is no intention of trying to say everything but simply to situate our own questions within a context.

### 1. One world, or the emergence of the planetary era

The main phenomenon that has surfaced in recent decades is doubtlessly this idea of one world [mondialisation in French] It can be described as a generalised exchange between different parts of the planet. It takes various forms: the worldwide boom in commerce, financial globalization, the wealth of multinationals, international law, cultural cross-breeding, the development of a single world of information and the networks of communication.

It also affects religions. Through the movement of persons and information, which it makes possible, it leads to the revitalisation of religions (even more so when religions are in contact with one another), and to a re-interpretation of the way to practise them. Hence there is ecumenism and religious pluralism, but also syncretism and fundamentalist reactions and, let us not forget, the internationalisation of mass gatherings of young people (Taizé and World Youth Days).

This is not a completely new phenomenon. If it has suddenly accelerated because of the explosion and liberalisation of money transfers, there are precedents for this, such as the great discoveries of the 16th century, colonisation, the industrial revolution and the transport revolution of the 19th and early 20th century. What we have witnessed, therefore, is not the birth of a process but rather its acceleration.

All this has brought about an increasingly close overlapping of various social processes on a world scale and a homogenisation of lifestyles and economic norms. Events which take place in a particular part of the world (political crises, economic changes) now have wide repercussions. But for all that, the result is not more harmonious and equitable relations between the various countries of the world; far from it. But we do live more than ever in an interdependent world.

## 2. Cultural mixing

To speak about cultural mixing we use the expression multiculturalism, but this word covers two things. On the one hand it refers to a fact: societies are more and more composed of distinct cultural groups (in today's world, not even 10% of countries are culturally homogeneous). On the other hand, it can indicate a policy whose aim is to bring about a better co-existence of these groups (something which varies greatly from country to country). We shall not treat this question.

The mixture of cultures is taking place on a massive scale, both inside countries and between them. This phenomenon takes on a greater importance because of the way in which migratory patterns have become world-wide. No country is any longer "chemically pure" (if it ever was) as cultures interlock as in a mosaic. It should be added that our societies offer at the same time all the understandings of the world which have emerged throughout history, as if everyone had access to a recapitulative memory. Put another way, our minds refer to understandings of the world that are a long way from being either contemporary or homogeneous.

Apart from this mixing of cultures and linked to it, there is also a noticeable increase in insistence on identity in many societies as various minorities wish to affirm their specificity in public life and demand that this be acknowledged. This cultural and political current is part of an historical evolution that has three stages: traditional societies promote the hierarchical principal in which each person is part of a



whole and occupies a determined place in it; modern societies promote democratic equality whereby each person is a citizen with the same rights as everybody; the societies of late modernity seek a different expression of the principle of equality based on the recognition of differences. This demand for recognition is not treated in the same way from country to country but it is to be found in many societies as part of the political and cultural scene. It is the basic reason for the demands of certain religious groups to have their identity recognised.

### 3. Societies incapable of resolving certain problems

There are many countries in which the structures in place are incapable of resolving the problems they have to face. The phenomenon of the one world is no stranger to this because the solution to many questions is beyond the small scale of each country. But there are other reasons which can explain the difficulties being met.

For example, the following hypothesis could be formulated: during a certain period (which could last for centuries) a country may even have to face up to problems encountered by the complementary aspects of its administration and the organisation of its market, the circulation of its economic possessions. But, by reason of historic changes, this provisional balance could be shattered in such a way that neither the administration nor the market forces are capable of confronting the new problems in a satisfactory way. Then new initiatives arise which provide more flexible structures capable of meeting the situation. This could be described as the birth of a third sector. Could not the foundation of the Institute be understood in just this way? In today's world, Non Government Organisations could be situated in the same logic. Could not their multiplication be an indication that the traditional structures of government and economic exchange no longer reply to the situation?

If this hypothesis were to be pursued, this would mean that the Institute would periodically need to re-evaluate the relevance of its institutions in relation to these great evolutions. Born as it was according to the logic of the "third sector", it subsequently found itself in the administration networks of education in the countries where it took root, so that the Brothers became functionaries. Would it not need periodically to re-find the dynamic that led to its birth, what one could call in another language its prophetic character? Is there not a need to question oneself about the danger of becoming simply a

'functionary' when working within a school system taken in charge by the state?

#### 4. Adults in search of an identity

The preceding remarks concerned collective phenomena. The search for identity has a social dimension, but it affects individuals directly, and in particular the way in which they construct themselves. Two aspects of this theme need particular attention.

##### a) The uncertain individual

In our description, we must first of all mention the constantly growing process of individualisation, the origin of which is normally traced back to the beginnings of the modern age. What does it consist in? In the progressive emergence of an "I without us". While in traditional societies, each human being perceives himself first of all as part of a social group, the modern individual sees himself first as a single being. What was formerly the prerogative of certain elite groups has spread slowly to other westernised social classes and this clear awareness of individuality has become second nature for many people. They do not notice the peculiarity of this view until they come into contact with groups which still maintain a holistic view of society. <sup>1</sup>

This trend of individualisation has continued to grow. But the price to be paid is a greater psychological precariousness, as the 'envelopes' which protected the traditional individual progressively disappear. This explains certain forms of fragility which can be observed more and more, and which are revealed in various ways. This is why some of our contemporaries feel they are psychologically isolated as individuals. As the formerly encompassing systems, ideologies and religions have become weakened, each one has to confront the great questions of life by himself as he finds himself more and more responsible for himself. This explains certain forms of behaviour which show that bearing this responsibility is sometimes too heavy a burden: use of support medicines, sleeping pills, tranquillisers, anti-depressants, recourse to drugs, the search for strong bonds of belonging in certain sects... There are as many ways of expressing the anguish as there is in existing by oneself.

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<sup>1</sup> We should not therefore confuse the movement towards individualisation (a socio-historical process) with individualism (a way of behaving that implies a moral judgement).

## b) Open identities

The question of identity is the object of innumerable publications, a sign of a crisis in this domain. This crisis concerns the family as well as the world of work and the main social institutions. Whatever structures personal identity has been turned upside down.

Identity is not made up of a dialogue with self but is formed through a whole collection of social relationships, either directly with family and neighbours or indirectly as through school and profession. Even more, we know how these different social roles, in the family, professional or social, fashion the identity of persons. When these elements become unstable, identity suffers the consequences.

## c) Some implications

In this context, questions concerning identity can become quite radical. Let us take two aspects. Can we still speak of continuity and the coherence of personal stories or are these completely dissipated? Is there still a centre to the personality or is this merely an illusion? Put another way, can we see a certain unity in our existence or has this completely disappeared?

In the first place, it is now difficult to think of our society as a fixed reality. The increase in life-expectancy, the mobility of many lives, the multiple and unceasing social changes, are so many factors which bring about numerous existential transformations in the course of life. From now on, our identity is a reality in the state of becoming. We construct throughout our lives. This poses anew the question of fidelity. This becomes difficult when the intensity of the moment is more important than the duration. Fidelity seems an inaccessible ideal, even unimaginable when the horizon is limited by our immediate concerns. In every case, it can no longer be understood as the rigid maintaining of positions once adopted when everything around is changing. We have to learn to keep our heads, thanks to our own internal gyroscope (Reisman) and to maintain our balance between what we seek and the jolts of life. But to determine a purpose is itself a problem when we wish to remain open to the different possibilities being presented rather than choosing a single direction.

Secondly, it would be a psychological absurdity to reduce our lives to an unconnected succession of events incapable of being

linked together. If this were the case, we would not even be aware of this discontinuity. In any case, that is not how we live. We were given a name which always designates us in the same way. Different administrative bodies allocate permanent categories to us and we are responsible for our actions before the law. In other words, society expects us to have a single, always identifiable identity. But it is also true that not all the elements of our identity have the same consistency. They range from what is most consistent, our administrative characterisation, to what is most malleable, our most intimate dimensions, passing through the relative solidity of our professional identity and the quite flexible character of our cultural identities.

Thirdly, identity is more and more the fruit of work done on oneself. It has become a reflex plan as is witnessed by the multiplication of psychological works and therapeutic suggestions aimed at self-direction. For some people, this work on oneself is an arduous task because of the complex and heterogeneous aspects to be taken into consideration (consider certain complicated family histories or the confused identities of many immigrants). Whatever way it is, each person has to give shape to his own identity because the great social categories are being reconstructed. Each person, therefore, is called to build a personal identity because this is no longer assigned as it once was.

Finally, identity is more and more the result of our personal efforts. We express it with the words of our language. We identify with family, professional and religious models of our environment. Our certainties and our perplexities regarding our identity derive from the world in which we live. To these global remarks we need to add that our identity is likewise marked by the co-existence of cultures (cf. the preceding remarks regarding cultural mixing) which means that our identity is made up of borrowings from a variety of sources.

##### 5. A strong spiritual search

While many sociologists were telling us that our society would be more and more secularised, there are strong currents indicating a search for the spiritual. These currents take various forms, ranging from Pentecostal exuberance, various syncretic African-American forms, those searchers grouped under the title of New Age, conquering Islamists, or the renewed interest in traditional religions, especially Shamanism.

Spirituality, often disconnected from its links to religious institutions, has the wind in its sails.

These currents, less and less confined to geographical zones, range across the continents. Although they are of different quality, they are sometimes the sign of great disarray and show they are looking for guidelines. They may surprise the Churches' strategies of evangelisation but may involve a considerable number of the faithful themselves.

#### 6. New church dynamics

It would be presumptuous to pretend to invoke the important evolutions traversing the Catholic church, each continent having more and more its own characteristics (the time for a monolithic Catholicism is finished), without forgetting the imbalance of the presence of Christians in the world in the southern hemisphere.

Among all the current evolutions let us recall for our own research the rediscovery brought about by Vatican II - and included in the Constitution on the Church - of the common condition of every Christian, in two directions: on the one hand, the Council has reaffirmed that belonging to the People of God is more fundamental than any distinction of functions (which is why the chapter on the people of God precedes and includes those concerning the hierarchy and the laity}; on the other hand, it reaffirms that the call to holiness is not reserved to specialists (and that is why the chapter on the universal vocation precedes that on religious). It is in that spirit it has become possible to speak of a Church-communion, even if that expression was not used as such by the Council.

This double rediscovery has had important consequences for the Church for the past forty years. It has profoundly changed the life of Christian communities with its creation of a synergy of charisms. Without it, it would not be possible for the Brothers to situate themselves as they are doing in society and in the Church, nor could lay people aspire to share our charism and our spirituality as we see happening everywhere in some way.

#### 7. What signs are there for us?

After having mentioned several major changes of our epoch (it would have been possible to refer to others), what are some consequences we can draw for ourselves?

## a) Our international character

With reference to the one world movement, we could ask ourselves whether we have known how to profit sufficiently from our international character. We certainly could learn a great deal from the way in which certain Districts have responded to the challenges of today's world with regard to mission. We are still in an experimental phase in what concerns our association with lay people. Exchanging experiences - directly or indirectly - could stimulate us. What we could never imagine is being done elsewhere. What has been lived in a certain part of the Institute could focus our attention on the paths of the future or, on the other hand, show us difficulties and dead-ends.

Even more, if we were to set out to profit more from our international experience in analysing the relevance of our institutions, that would, perhaps, give us greater courage in imagining new possibilities (cf. the comments on the third section).

## b) Inculturation

In reference to the manner of living the Lasallian charism, how do we take into account the diverse cultures of the regions in which we are situated? The question can be asked with reference to our style of life, our way of living the mission or interpreting the Lasallian mission. The question is undoubtedly a delicate one (witness the prudence of the Church in this domain) but it could be vital if we wish to avoid exporting a western culture into the whole world. Let us add that the interest manifested by the believers of other religions in certain aspects of our spirituality considerably enlarges the way of asking certain questions. It even displaces our way of understanding the contours of our identity. It certainly has consequences on the way of living new forms of association which could be different according to the regions of the world.

Another way of speaking about inculturation is to ask ourselves how lay people can reformulate the Lasallian charism from their own situation, not forgetting the place of women in the Lasallian family, quite different from a charism carried hitherto exclusively by celibate men. Put another way, after an indispensable phase of introducing lay people to the Lasallian tradition, there must come a phase where they will be the authors of a new expression of this tradition. They must not be placed simply in a position of being repeaters. This could be even more important in that Lasallian spirituality is largely

centred mainly on the way of living the profession of an educator, and could be considered from this viewpoint as a lay spirituality. The significance of these considerations in a church sense is considerable.

c) The role of accompaniment

If we take into account the evolutionary and sometimes fragile character of identity, will we not have to give an important place to the accompaniment of individuals and not only groups? The same remark could be made if we take into account the often winding and turbulent journeys of people (cf. the comments on the spiritual search of our contemporaries).

It is not only taking this into account that directs us towards accompaniment but it is also the responsibility of the Brothers with regard to their partners. The 42nd General Chapter does not say only that lay colleagues become real partners but speaks also of the development "of partnership in which the Brothers commit themselves" (Shared Mission 1.3): partnership is a reciprocal commitment in which they are involved.

Lasallian identity undoubtedly has a community dimension which should not be put aside on behalf of the personal dimension. In the domain of accompaniment, we do not have a very strong tradition, particularly with adults. The formation which we habitually offer is in every way indispensable, but it cannot play all roles. Should we not examine what could be such a personal accompaniment in the spirit of our tradition and prepare ourselves to put it into operation?

d) A new sense of belonging for the idea of association

Association is a central reality in our tradition. It could find a renewed relevance in the present reality in which we hesitate between a strategic withdrawal and a fallback on identity. It could equally be a response to the desire for belonging manifested today among many people. Would it not be interesting to show this belonging, particularly in showing it as normally the fruit of a common construction. Living association situates us as both actors and partners. Lasallian identity is the fruit of a community journey directed towards an objective. That could be the source of a stimulating dynamic for all.

For your continuing reflection and sharing

To what extent does the description made of the evolution of our world fit the current reality of our Region or country? What should we emphasize the most, keeping our own culture in mind?

What are the missing elements with regard to the situation we find ourselves in?

In considering the different points separately (those present in the text as well as those we have added), what are the implications as regards association? In particular, what is suggested by the connection between the search for identity of our contemporaries, their search for spirituality and the idea of association? To what should that make us more attentive?



## **The Challenge of Mission: Reinventing the Educational Community**

Pedro Gil, FSC

In thinking about mission we find ourselves confronted by an especially delicate task due to the historical moment in which we live.

If we are concerned about this, it is not because we are few or many, with new works or ones already known, in one country or in many. The challenge of mission is not in the technical or material order. It is something much more remote. It does not refer to our work but to its meaning. Our problem is not how to work but rather what is our work.

Responding to this challenge requires us to look for the very roots of our identity.

It is wonderful to discover that the renewal of mission leads us as it were by the hand to the theme of Association.

### 1. The Lasallian project and the change of epoch

We can distinguish various challenges in the world of education.

The first of these is in relation to the poor. The poor, in fact, do not have the same access to educational resources as others do. This situation has worsened with the dynamic of a globalization that is increasing the distance between the better off and the marginalized. Moreover - and this is the most important aspect - the poor are victims of an educational and cultural model conceived usually for the exploitation of the world and its peoples.

There is also the challenge of the disintegrating State. Because of globalization, the poor are almost disappearing, missing out on the previously known forms of social care. The forces of globalization need to have societies free of every obstacle to their interests, so that they are continually dismantling all the known forms of local administration.

Globalization also presumes that all the cultural forms change. To increase the ease of interchange, new criteria for values have been appearing, new aesthetic principles and their own ways of thinking. At the same time, human relationships are marked by new forms of communication which become instruments and

condition of the new culture. All of this brings about a general uncertainty which causes great difficulty for the new social forms to see the point of the function of religion in the new models of life.

Finally, the Lasallian heritage itself is submitted to a similar historical turnaround and is changed into a challenge. The heritage we receive is not easy to take on in the new conditions of the world, so that we run the risk of it being badly understood or simply forgotten as we keep on distancing ourselves from the world in which it was born.

What does all this say to us? What does it mean?

At the source of all the challenges

Obviously, much more could be said, but these four aspects are enough to evoke the challenge that we as Lasallians receive from what we have always dedicated ourselves to and called 'our mission'.

Without adding anything more, these four features already continue showing us how the world of our mission contains much more than new difficulties for us. When we speak about 'challenge' we are saying that below these difficulties there is a sign, a gesture of the Lord that jolts us.

Underneath the 'challenge of the mission' there is much more than an invitation to our ingenuity. The whole thing makes us feel insecure, as though before our very eyes everything we have known has disappeared and there is emerging a model we have not known. That is why we say that the challenge of mission is much more than a call to generosity.

In reality, what we are discovering in the world of education is a reflection of the great sign of our times: the crisis of all the models of relationships, the emerging of needs and new forms of living together. As in the major moments of history, people are looking for assurance in face of what is appearing, something that guarantees its human character and meaning in the paths of globalization.

It is from these educational plans that, in what is being prepared, there is hope for humanity...

2. Our ideal project

In face of the different challenges to be confronted today, the Community of the Christian Schools turns in on itself seeking a solid reference point for what it wishes to be. It feels itself in a new world and looks within itself, questioning itself about its identity and its meaning among the institutions of these new societies. This we have seen in tracing the path of the General Chapters since 1946.

In the past fifty years, in obedience to the urgent necessity of understanding itself from within, the Institute as never before has studied its origins and its history. It could be said that its concern went ahead of what was happening and was the best indication that the times were changing. From this effort there has been emerging, among other things, the evidence that the content of the first foundation was the Community of the Christian schools. Nothing else.

Throughout this period we have gone on seeing our ideal or our main objective as offering a common project to our people, a 'school' where we lived together, a style and an offering that was shared.

Even if at times we forgot, living as we did in the midst of urgent needs and changes, we know that in the foundation period the concern was not so much to establish Christian schools but rather to establish communities to give life to them. We know this because otherwise there would have been no point in establishing the body of educators as they did. That is why we know also that the inherited value that has maintained our institutions over these 300 years of Modernity has been our educational community. Our heritage, therefore, is to share our same life project in a educational service with preference for the poor.

Our heritage, that is to say our identity and our social value through our educational projects in the service of which live a group of people., consists in offering them a clear Sign of Hope. Our community has always been the guarantee of our work: it has assured its stability and its meaning.

Our heritage consists in the ability to live the same project together in such a way that there is the same fidelity to those who are the recipients of our professional work as there is to those with whom we work.

Our specific ability in facing these new times

It is in this way, in face of the challenges to education in a changing world, that we count on the value of the School lived as Community. Nowadays, it is clear that 'school' no longer means what it meant, for example in France, in 1850. On the other hand, whatever be the appearance of the educational plan for these new times, its appearance as community must continue to mean the same. This is our strength in face of the new challenges of our mission.

Throughout these past fifty years, nevertheless, the dynamic of globalization and the crisis of social institutions have imposed on us a certain loss of vision and a forgetting of all this. Throughout this period we have developed our ability for organization and our projects have become complex as never before. Moreover, because of the diminution of the number of Brothers, the new members involved in Lasallian projects were invited more in terms of their work than of their persons. As a result of this, the 'community' dimension, our inheritance, has known a certain imbalance.

Parallel to all this, nevertheless, we have seen develop everywhere a call for something more, as if commitment to the work was not sufficient when what was needed was commitment to people. This last aspect we call 'association'.

It is not difficult to interpret this double movement as the deepest challenge to the Lasallian heritage in face of these new times. Between the two, they help us recall and respond to the great question of what we wish to be.

Thus it is that before these new times we knew that our institutions were greater than the sum of its members. We know that above all our titles and our memories we form part of a collective identity capable of sustaining hope among the poor.

This identity is much more than a refuge or fortress for us. It is the evidence that the world is much more than an organization. If, in the midst of the dynamics of globalization there exist institutions such as ours, the future still remains possible. The poor know that.

### 3. So that the mission be possible

When we consider at the same time the challenges of the world of education and the value of our heritage, we immediately meet the great aims of our institutional dynamic.

We are a network of projects, an association with local roots, a complex organism that needs to propose objectives for itself to arrive at the vision it has of itself. That is why our way of perceiving this historical moment at the same time as our identity of three centuries sets out large fields of action. In them we go on realizing our mission.

Before everything else, just as it was three centuries ago, our mission is to be concrete in following out a clear relationship between our educational projects and the needs of the new societies.

Today, just like three centuries ago, for our educational projects to be a Sign of Hope in face of these new times, we need to be animated within by an intelligent and consistent strength to understand what is going on and to give an answer. For the new community of the Christian Schools to show itself at the height of its calling, there is a need to revise what we consider a valid educational project and revise it intelligently in face of the new needs for the development of people.

Seeking this coherence means that we need on occasions to re-design programs that seem to be too remote from our tradition. As happens in every social dynamic, not all the formulae can be consolidated because they deal more with opportunity or imagination than with something solid. But the logic of life requires that without initially accepting the possibility of differences no institution arrives at responding to this social novelty.

This cannot be achieved without an adequate institutional model.

It was like this already three hundred years ago. We cannot forget, indeed, that in those days of the first foundation there was no Ministry of Education nor guaranteed systems of economic support that support the educational world of today. That is why the founding community had to invent everything: timetable, programs, formation, organization into a network, systems of thought, methodology etc. And all of this was done before Western administrators considered that education was their responsibility.

So just as it was three hundred years ago, our mission requires that we put forward the goal of setting up new communities capable of doing all this.

Each time it becomes more urgent for the Lasallian world to put forward its aims in order to live its mission. As an answer to the new conditions of history and of the church, the heirs to the Lasallian tradition need to discover new ways of living and expressing their links with the new educational projects. They need to understand that all its members are potentially destined to hear the same call of God and that they can nourish their lives from the depths of their educational ministry.

Discovering the face of the mission every day

The universality of our project is teaching us the diversity of possible models. They help us to take into account that schools and educating are not identical realities in all cultures and in all societies. But above all they show us that none of our projects need be exempt from the need to redefine themselves, the more conventional it seems to be.

The crisis of social administration models proposed by globalization makes us see that underneath the diversity of our projects there is something much more important: the need to reinvent and to recreate the idea of school every day. That is where our Lasallian heritage has real value.

The work of the Community of the Christian Schools, just like other similar family traditions, offers the world a specific added value: the experience of belonging, of something common, of shared fruitfulness. Today, as always, this institutional experience is the guarantee that the three indicated aims can be realized and give a face to the mission.

#### 4. Strategic priorities

The distinct aims we can propose for our journey cannot be achieved without directions or strategic priorities. The Lasallian tradition has always known and has always sought directions, emphases, values to help it.

If we expect that our Lord and our people are hoping for something from our educational projects as Signs of Hope before the world that is coming, we have to project the necessary attitudes and procedures. We cannot indeed arrive at institutional designs that are coherent at the same time with the new needs of the world and with the values of our heritage if we do not articulate our programs on determined criteria.

In this case, today, just as three centuries ago, our community needs to live animated by faith, that is to say, by a responsible attention to the signs of the times.

Understood in this way, faith or the spirit of faith show that the fundamental criterion at every time of historical change is fidelity. That is our great priority.

At times of historical change as occurred at the time of foundation, what makes the institution valuable is not first of all its capacity for work and of organization but its intelligent and responsible fidelity to those for whom it is destined.

By definition, times of change know better what is not seen rather than the new and convenient. That is why they seek, experiment, verify. Afterwards, little by little, the waters become serene and a new course emerges which either coincides or does not with what preceded it. That is why times of change call us not to be popular but to be faithful.

In order to cultivate this value it is presumed that in the midst of our educational projects there is a very clear awareness of what is needed to be Signs of Hope for the poor. This awareness means to live by being animated by the responsibility in face of the new conditions of life that what matters most to us is the truthfulness of our proposal rather than its immediate results or its social profitability.

Inventing and sharing responsibility

This feeling of responsibility does not allow us to save our efforts: at one time or another we will be steered towards results with contrasting values. We need our projects to be truly creative and free so that within them all the members feel they have something to say.

This so because fidelity is creative.

Fidelity unites and diversifies, it makes things uniform and distinguishes them at the same time. It insists that all persons have their own individuality, each needing a specific answer and capable of an original project. When an educational project is animated by fidelity, every person brings a specific way of answering needs and of offering something. In doing this they all resemble one another and yet they are all distinct. No one is limited to reproducing something. This is the risk of the

Community that makes it capable of responding to the challenges of the new society.

In the new Lasallian communities, concretely, the value of fidelity requires that the religious and the secular, the Christian and the person of good will all meet. All have the same concern to animate the educational project from their way of living their fidelity. By their very way of living, some emphasize efficiency, fruitfulness, and acceptance; others show mystery, hope and availability.

Everyone is animated by their awareness of their responsibility at this historical moment. That is how they share daily in the re-invention of the Sign of the Educational Community.

For your continuing reflection and sharing

By beginning from the four steps put forward, consider the reality of the local educational project in which the group is involved and consider the following questions:

What are the most important challenges made to us by those for whom our mission is intended (whatever kind of answer they give us)?

What is the relationship between our work and our group, that is to say, what is the educational organization aspect and what is that of the educational community?

What are the strategic strategies which are really leading our commitment to our project?

What is all this theme of Association telling us?



## The Challenge of Belonging

Bruno Alpago, FSC

From a broad point of view, Lasallian association includes very many persons involved in the education of the young. Within this grouping, there are those who dedicate their lives completely to it; many others employ only a part of their time in this task, doing it not simply as a work to gain a living or to arrive at some level of professional satisfaction. What is it that moves them or inspires them? What can this mean for their own lives or for those whom they educate? How far can this dedication take them? What value can this have for the world?

The preceding paragraphs show that for those educators who make the Lasallian inspiration their own, the activity which involves them cannot be identified only with the realization of an individual or collective work. In the tasks which compose any kind of recognized educational activity, in terms of meaning or as an end, there is the response to a call, the conclusion to being sent, which corresponds to a confidence placed in them. It is concerned with a mission entrusted to a social body that responds to it by carrying out a profession.

The foundation community, gathered around John Baptist de La Salle, expressed this concern at the beginning of its Rule: "The Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools is a society in which profession is made of teaching school gratuitously"; "the end of this Institute is to give a Christian education to the poor, and for this purpose the members teach school" (Rule of 1718, chapter 1, articles 1 & 3; the same expressions are found in the Rule of 1705).

A first glance would invite us to see mission highlighted in these words ("give a Christian education to children"), the body ("Society", "Institute"), the profession ("teaching school", doing it "gratuitously"). Other phrases from the same text carry important precisions. The children in question are "children of artisans and the poor", usually abandoned in a hopeless situation. Freeing them from this fatal captivity opens them up to the possibility of a dignified human life, it is the Good News -the "gospel" - to which this association of teachers dedicates itself so as to bring to this world of the poor, and simply through it to the world : it is the content of this

'Christian education" (Rule of 1718, Chapter 1, articles 4-6, cf. also MTR 194, 1).

1. The experience of a call...

Even though the Lasallian community was born in a time and ambiance of Christianity, history shows that its inspiration continues to exercise its attraction for very many educators, even when they hold very different positions in relation to religious faith. These people recognize that the principles and Lasallian style of living a dedication to education offers a response and gives form to questions and deep and vital desires.

Generally speaking, educators can manage to grasp that, working in this way, they are responding to a "plan" that precedes them, gives them a direction, drives them and transcends them. They understand that here there is a personal urgent call towards something which is very important, not only in itself, but for them as well. They perceive, finally, that all of this is important not only for what they do but for who they are: in other words, that what is at stake is not simply a duty but rather an identity.

In this having and being it is quite normal the individual or groups of educators feel that they share with other men and women an impulse in favour of the good of humanity and its progress. Once they have taken this as objective it is not unusual for them to turn their attention to a particular area or more generally to those who are the weakest, most unfortunate, neglected, disinherited or excluded and work in solidarity with them.

This experience can go in two directions. One could be called the direction of identity in which, by educating in fidelity to a "plan", they discover therein a feeling, which transcending every relative or partial value, finds itself in the highest human values and from that lofty point can exact not only professional competence and moral honesty but can also set a whole direction in an exclusive and total service. The other could be called the direction of association: fidelity to a "plan" educates, develops potential and brings fulfilment - and is generally supported within a human community to which the person belongs.

In reality both directions complement one another. In particular, the community dimension is something important. On the one hand, every educational process as a human process of

growth points towards the possibility of improving the way human beings live together. On the other hand, the community of educators and of those being educated is a sign and an anticipation of the end point of the educational process: this same community guarantees the efficiency of the process (a relative efficiency in processes dealing with free people). Finally, all persons who feel that they have a mission in education feel themselves driven to share their experience of a call with others. In short, if community is the aim of the educational mission, it is also its proper ambiance and its first resource, besides being its origin.

In the same way, every form of Lasallian association seeks to be a sphere of careful listening to the educational needs of poor youth - and through that to the young in general - and discernment with regard to the call of the young. The members of this community educate themselves mutually to read and interpret human reality from the viewpoint of the poor.

... a call that can be lived as God's call

Anyone who believes in God, and precisely in a God involved in human history, accepts that God is the origin of the call and the final end of the response that is given. For many such, it is both clarifying and stimulating to know that this call and response can be properly understood under the name of consecration.

In that, as in every other form of consecration, the initiative comes from God. De La Salle affirms this clearly: "It is God who has enlightened the hearts of those whom he has destined to announce his word to children". "He has given them this ministry (MTR 193.1). From this point of view, educating young people is "God's work" (MTR 193,3; 201,1; etc.) God is interested in this work because what is at stake is the realization or the frustration of human life. God's interest goes so far as to send his own Son so that human beings "would have life and have it to the full"(cf MTR 201,3, citing John 10,10).

Dedicating oneself to education, therefore, is accepting God's call, recognising God's initiative and offering oneself to collaborate in his plan.

If the religious dimension is meaningful, every form of Lasallian association helps its members to face up to and live their profession as educators with these characteristics of a consecration. In order to do that, faith develops in them, allowing them to see in their vocation as educators the supreme

kindness of God who calls them, destines them and sends them to work in his "vineyard". The same faith makes them see in the needs of the poor and of young people in general that what is at stake is the plan of a loving God who "wishes everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (I Tim 2,4). That is why, finally, the awareness of a call is celebrated with thanksgiving, the offering is ratified and there is a humble plea for the grace to be faithful to a faithful God.

## 2. The experience of a response...

In experiencing this love which moves them and gives meaning to their lives, educators offer to help the young enter into this love, above all for those who have had less experience and less awareness of this love which is their salvation.

The educators' dedication is characterized by an enthusiasm that is known in the Lasallian tradition as zeal.

This enthusiastic gift of themselves needs to be wholehearted. Total in its duration: every day, the whole day and every day, educators renew their commitment to the young. Total in its intensity: educators offer everything possible, everything love demands. Their complete disinterestedness presumes not only gratitude for this service but also renouncing all forms of self-seeking. They do not hesitate before the perspective of giving their lives out of love for the young in the exercise of their ministry.

This ideal is rarely attained and for many it is impossible to propose it in all its radicalness. It does not, however, lack meaning to the extent that it does point out just where a journey of Lasallian inspiration leads.

Such a service is complete and completing. This is the witness of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian schools whose members embrace it completely. In particular, seen from this point of view, the fact that the Institute has sought and struggled to maintain throughout its history its exclusively lay character, in spite of pressure from without and hesitations from within, is an especially enlightening sign.

Every form of Lasallian association offers itself as an environment to live and cultivate the exercise of education as a response to the love that calls, given that it is a love that impels.

...that can be lived as a consecration to the poor

God's call to educators takes form in the educational needs of the young, especially of the poor.

In order to talk about what is being said here about consecration it is necessary that the cry of those needing education be seen as a call "for me", that it not collapse into something merely objective or more or less anecdotal, but that it penetrates the hearts of educators, challenges them and shakes them and draws from them a committed response. Something like this can be read in the personal journey of John Baptist de La Salle. Brought up in the comfortable middle class surroundings of his time and place, a canon, a doctor, more than usually rich, he was progressively captured by the poor through a series of commitments, each one leading to another that had not been foreseen. In order to be faithful to these commitments deep and painful breaks had to be made. In this way, the world and its needs which he could see at first only from the viewpoint of an external do-gooder, ended up by becoming his own world, the place to discern the saving plan of God and commit himself to it. Enlightened by faith, he took on the interests of the poor as those of God and therefore, zeal for the salvation of the poor was nothing more than zeal for the glory of God.

In a similar process, the attention of the educators to the call of God makes itself real in the attention given to the cries of the poor. Zeal for 'God's work' is made real in the loving, intelligent and disinterested dedication to young people, in the concern to make their culture relevant and to update one's pedagogy in order to offer them a better service. Assuming the interests of the Reign of God is made real when educators give preference to those whom society has relegated to the last place. In carrying out this messianic sign, the Good News is announced to the poor.

Every Lasallian association consists in locating oneself where the poor are, in a place to understand and commit oneself to the world of education. For this path gives its witness to the supreme value of human beings "the only creature on the earth that God has sought for himself" (GS 24) and consecrates persons to it with love and a hope of promoting it.

### 3. The experience of belonging...

The Lasallian response to the educational needs of the poor is always given in an associated way: together and by association.

Chapter 3 of this dossier shows that is not something accidental.

It is a fact that adhering to the Lasallian way of educating is to live incorporated into a group - or groups - of persons who arrive at infusing into the educational group certain characteristics which take the form of a shared "spirit".

Perhaps this is more in evidence when someone arrives for the first time. Quite often educators coming into a Lasallian institution notice a style of relationships which draw their attention. Among their colleagues they notice there is respect, openness, collaboration, solidarity, dialogue, mutual support and even affection and supporting the institution even as far as personal abnegation. Towards the students, they note respect and the valuing of persons, interest in individual situations, concern for their progress, closeness, readiness to adapt, availability, creativity to make use of new pedagogical resources, giving time, means and achievement well beyond what could be achieved through strict discipline.<sup>2</sup>

Adhering to a group of educators of these or other characteristics allows for something more than just "feeling good there." It is to incorporate oneself in an ambit of meeting between the call (the call of the poor, the call of the ideal of humanity..) and the efficient educational response (making a worthy standard of human living a possibility for the poor...). It is to incorporate oneself into something which is a sign (an anticipated or embryonic presence) of the human community that is possible, and the instrument of its construction.

Every form of Lasallian association tries to offer itself as such a place and to cultivate among its members this same sense of belonging.

...that can be lived as communion

Advancing in the implications of belonging to any form of community it may be possible to arrive at understanding and experiencing the educational vocation and the response given in association with others, as a free gift:

- the call itself is gift because at the basis of the responsibility for the entrusted task there is the deference

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<sup>2</sup> It is clear that placing emphasis on relationships in no way implies disregarding the learning necessary to build up the human community. Emphasis is not denying the rest.

that comes from a trusting love and also because it orients (and even reveals) the abilities and talents with which someone is endowed;

- the response itself is free gift as it surpasses previous expectations, takes persons where they never thought they would ever arrive and furthermore leads them to overcome self-centeredness so that they embrace the interests of the poor as their own;
- colleagues and the young persons being educated are also free gift: all these with their gifts and different and complementary needs, demonstrate the inexhaustible richness of human beings and in face of them, persons perceive themselves as free gift for themselves, their colleagues and their students;
- there is the free gift of the Lasallian 'fact', whether it comes from near or far, offering itself as a saving possibility and invites someone to take an active part in all this with others;
- finally, and above all, free gift of fidelity expressed in different ways: fidelity of the call to the extent that the cry of the poor will never be silenced and needs always to be heard; fidelity of a response in that the permanence of the self-gift of the individual or group conquers human possibilities, fidelity of the Lasallian community, which is always being born again in the midst of historical change, always being directed or re-directed by the old and new cries of the poor.

In this way, a Lasallian community - whatever form is needed to adapt itself to new situations - where the vocation of an educator offers itself as a gift that changes itself into a place of communion if, by this word, we are speaking of a meeting point that is continuous and not something superficial.

Communion with the transcendent (that can be lived in many forms of religious belief, including none at all) the awareness of the gift takes us back to its origin and to its end, the faithful and generous response to the poor testifies to the transcendent value of the human being (of all and of each one) that is not reducible to anything else.

Communion with others: the experience of working with others and for others can each time develop the union of projects and of lives to greater heights, as each person and each group lives out its fidelity.

If we arrive at calling the transcendent reality we intuit as the prime source and final end of all love, all gift and all fidelity as "God" (or 'Whatever'), then the commitment of the individual to procure with others through the medium of education, the worthy and just participation of the poor in the human community, will be called consecration to God in order to procure his glory.

This is the ultimate horizon of belonging to any form of Lasallian association.

For your continuing reflection and sharing

Of the elements presented here, which of them express best the reality of association as it is lived in your Region? How would you present them to a group of people who seek advice in making a greater commitment to the Lasallian educational mission?

Which of the elements presented on these pages give greater clarity, stimulating perspectives and incentives for mutual relationships among colleagues with whom the educational mission is carried out? What do you find particularly challenging in your own reality where you work?

To what extent does this reflection reflect the reality of your educational center?

What steps need to be taken in your educational center so that something of the above could be realized? In your District? In the Institute?

What ideas do you find most useful for the relationship between Brothers and lay Lasallians? What other ideas might should be incorporated?



## **Lasallian Spirituality and Association**

Michael F. Meister, FSC

As the Lasallian message has spread around the world, it has also been embraced by many - students and teachers alike - who are not Roman Catholic or even Christian. This is a situation De La Salle could not have foreseen, but it is the result of the attractiveness of his vision and his charism within which all Lasallians - regardless of their beliefs - find themselves at home. This is where the traditional understanding of Lasallian Spirituality has been enlarged as it has been shared more widely among the diversity of people who have come to be associated through their work in implementing the Lasallian vision. What seems to make De La Salle's vision attractive to so many is that it first embraces young people where they are and seeks to save them by means of an education that touches not only their minds but also their hearts. This is done in a context of respect for individual students and teachers - for their persons, for their destiny, for their beliefs. This respect is based on faith, which is the spirit of this Institute, and it likewise manifests itself in a zeal that continues to animate the Lasallian mission for students.

### 1. An Attractive Vision

In his Meditations for the Time of Retreat, De La Salle offers many different perspectives on the Lasallian educators' encounter with their students. But perhaps none of these perspectives is as evocative of the spiritual foundation of his doctrine of education as this one from the third Meditation:

Since you are ambassadors and ministers of Jesus Christ in the work that you do, you must act as representing Jesus Christ himself. He wants your disciples to see him in you and receive your teaching as if he were teaching them. They must be convinced that the truth of Jesus Christ comes from your mouth, that it is only in his name that you teach, that he has given you authority over them. They are a letter which Christ dictates to you, which you write each day in their hearts, not with ink, but by the Spirit of the living God. For the Spirit acts in you and by you through the power of Jesus Christ. He helps you overcome all the obstacles to their salvation, enlightening them in the person of Jesus Christ and helping them avoid all that could be displeasing to him. In order to fulfill your responsibility with as much perfection and care as God requires

of you, frequently give yourself to the Spirit of our Lord to act only under his influence and not through any self-seeking. This Holy Spirit, then, will fill your students with Himself, and they will be able to possess fully the Christian spirit.

Regardless of their cultural or religious background, the sense of this passage is clear as it relates to the sense of mission embraced by those who call themselves "Lasallian": there is a sacredness to what is done - they are ambassadors of the sacred. Therefore, not only are they conduits of knowledge for their students, but they also represent for them a connection with what is holy, with what is ultimate, and with what is proper to the realm of the Spirit.

## 2. Approaching Lasallian Spirituality

An exploration of Lasallian spirituality must begin with the God of De La Salle and the Christian faith within which he articulated his vision for education. At the same time, as noted above, this vision continues to live by virtue of the Brothers and the countless individuals who have joined and continue to join them in their mission and who together call themselves Lasallians. Such a vision is shaped more and more by a common sense of association, that is the sense of working together for the same end and is broadly sustained by a common spirituality, built on the spiritual principles the Founder himself embraced and enunciated. This spirituality today has grown larger in the sense that it takes into account the fact that the Lasallian world is truly global, diverse, and composed of a "trinity" of stakeholders: the Brothers, those who associate with them in their mission of education, and their students who bind the three together with a purpose related to their very salvation. Lasallian spirituality, therefore, celebrates the fact that the Brothers and their associates are continually called into action by God and by their students to save those same students.

## 3. What Is Spirituality?

The realm of spirituality takes one inward and concerns the things of the spirit. It is at least an apprehension or even an encounter with the sacred and the holy that stands apart from the events of ordinary experience. It is a way of both seeking God and responding to the invitation of God to look deeper and to see everything differently. It is a profound element of every religious tradition, and apart from the names one gives to God, it represents a common ground on which all humans can relate.

Spirituality is fundamentally a way of appreciating and articulating the experience of God. Every culture and civilization across time carries with it the record of its experiences of the sacred. While everyone experiences God differently, there are also articulations of this experience that are deeply meaningful to many people at the same time and over long periods of time. These become traditions or "schools" that attract adherents who find deeper meaning in their lives because this particular spirituality gives them a way to articulate it and to live it.

Spirituality, then, is God's gift to everyone. It is not merely a rarefied experience for "holy people" or "professional religious people." Christians believe that God loves human beings so much that he became one of them in the person of Jesus Christ. In a very significant way, spirituality is the growing appreciation of this reality over the period of a lifetime.

#### 4. A Lasallian Spirituality

So it is with the followers of John Baptist de La Salle, who have inherited a spiritual tradition from him and who strive to embody that tradition in their lives as they carry on his vision through the Lasallian mission of education around the world today. His spirituality - so deeply rooted in the New Testament - grows out of his abiding conviction that his disciples are, in St. Paul's words, "ambassadors of Christ" for their students and the students, in turn, are a letter which Christ dictates and which their teachers write in their hearts every day.

Lasallian spirituality is, therefore, a relational spirituality. Not only do those who embrace it find there the means to foster their own relationship with God, but they also discover in this spirituality that they become a powerful force for the good in the lives of their students and that their relationship with their students is a key element of their experience of the holy. This sense of relationship highlights the originality of the spirituality De La Salle proposed for the members of his society. It was not something to be lived only in quiet contemplation behind the walls of the cloister as had been common. Rather, he responded to the needs of the poor of his time by adapting numerous elements of contemporary French spirituality specifically for his teachers, and gave them a system that embraced the mystery of God present and active within the young people who populated his schools.

Christians believe that they exist first and foremost for God as revealed through Jesus. At the same time, the vocation of the Lasallian calls him or her to consider this existence for God as contextualized in their association together for the purpose of education. The relationship of education becomes the medium through which they encounter God - especially by their attention to the needs of those they teach. And when the students see themselves as part of this relationship, they too are invited and brought into the realm where this encounter is made possible.

#### 5. Not Only for Brothers

Lasallian spirituality is a manifestation of the living heritage of the Institute that comes directly from De La Salle, and it is an outgrowth of his own spiritual journey. For modern Lasallians, therefore, it is a way of weaving the story of God together with their own story - their history, their life journey - as individuals and as an Institute "associated together," focused on their mission of education. In this sense, then, it is a "spirituality of journey" - a kind of "Lasallian pilgrimage."

Spirituality in the Lasallian tradition is a spirituality for people actively involved in the ministry of the Gospel - a ministry carried out in the world, not separated from it. Lasallian spirituality, therefore, is not only for the Brothers. It is clear in recent years - especially since the principle of Shared Mission has been embraced so enthusiastically - that their lay colleagues and associates want to share in more than the Brothers' work. Not only do these associates want to know more about the Brothers' story and heritage, they also want to know more about their spirituality, which they find very attractive, inviting, down-to-earth, and accessible precisely because it is a spirituality that is grounded in the here-and-now realities of one's life as a teacher. It is a reminder that this world - the world of their students - is the locus of the Incarnation. This being the case, it is incumbent on the Brothers who inherit this spirituality from their Founder, to teach and to share it with those associated together with them. And so, not only are they associated by virtue of their mission, their ministry, or their common vocation to teach, they are also associated by an invitation - that stems from De La Salle himself - to find God where he lives and to see him in their students as those same students hope to see God in them.

#### 6. A Spirituality for Teachers

As a spirituality for teachers, Lasallian spirituality seeks to unite and integrate the evangelical mission to announce Christ with the professional mission to teach. Thus, it abandons the traditional dichotomies of active versus contemplative and professional versus spiritual. It is a spirituality for educators, for teachers, for those who shape the hearts and minds of the young, for those who incarnate the reality of Christ for their students. In this way, it is a spirituality that celebrates the presence of God - God who is continually active in the world, continually creating, continually speaking his word, continually inviting. It is a way of consciously living in the presence of this God who is present in the teachers, present in their students, present in the educational relationship that brings them together, and present in the place where they are. Thus, Lasallian spirituality embodies in its own characteristic ways what is common to all Christian spiritualities - the experience of God's Holy Spirit.

#### 7. The Primacy of Scripture

In the development of De La Salle's spiritual doctrine, the primacy of Scripture is evident everywhere, and this mirrors his deep devotion to the Word of God throughout his lifetime. It is as though the Founder becomes transparent in his spiritual writing in order to allow the Word of God to shine through him. In this, he models for his followers what is at the heart of Christian spirituality - letting God shine through them. This becomes the prime directive for Lasallian educators, and with St. Paul they say every day: "I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20). In the development of a spiritual foundation for teachers - active ministers - De La Salle borrowed heavily from St. Paul. As the Apostle exhorted his congregations he spoke of himself and his companions as "ambassadors," "ministers," "administrators," and "messengers" of Christ - of the holy, the sacred, the Ultimate. In the context of a spirituality for Lasallians, each of these terms also clearly defines their role in relation to their calling and those for whom they are called - their students. Like St. Paul, their spirituality as Lasallians is a dynamic way to connect their calling to those for whom they are called.

#### 8. Tension and Dynamism in Lasallian Spirituality

There is a compelling and creative tension in Lasallian spirituality. On the one hand, De La Salle urges his followers - in the language of St. Paul - to see themselves as "ambassadors"

of Christ. On the other hand, in one of his boldest insights, he highlights their role as "saviors" for their students. In their role as "ambassadors," they themselves represent Christ and they also represent him to others. Lasallian spirituality keeps them - as ambassadors - in constant communion with their Master. They embody his presence wherever they go and in whatever they do or say. In this sense, their spirituality is outward-oriented: it is for their students that they are who they are. In their mission and ministry as Lasallians, their students call them into being. Thus, in their spiritual role as "saviors," they bring their students to God and they bring God to their students. They also call their students into being and are called into being by them.

This reciprocal relationship between teacher and student - not only on the level of education but on the level of the heart - is characteristic of the Lasallian vocation. In their professional role, it is the sound and practical education they impart that "saves" their students for freedom and dignity, and for their rightful place in the world. As "ambassadors" and "saviors," then, Lasallians find fulfilment in a spirituality that is Christocentric and Incarnational. As they enflesh Christ for their students and see him enfleshed in them, they also grow more deeply into Christ's likeness. At the heart of all Christian spirituality is the desire to become more like Christ. As Lasallians, in imitating Christ the teachers model him for their students.

#### 9. The Role of Providence

In yet another creative tension for Lasallians, the power of their active role as "ambassadors" and "Saviors" is offset by a humble sense of perspective that every spirituality must maintain. As Lasallians, they frame this perspective in the words of the Prophet Habakkuk: "Lord, the work is yours" (3:2). For De La Salle, and for them, spirituality is centered in a reliance on God's Providence. This is a very significant aspect: they trust in God's fidelity. Their work is God's work, and in God they can do all things.

St. Paul highlights this tension when he states: "the weakness of God is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor 1:25).

#### 10. Spirituality and the "Spirit of Our Institute"

In addition to the above sense of Providence, De La Salle's disciples find other "primordial concepts" in his spiritual

doctrine that are the bedrock for his spirituality: faith, zeal, and gratuity. Faith and Zeal - like two sides of a coin - comprise the spirit of the Institute and are never separated. In his Meditation for the feast of the Epiphany, the Founder writes: "May faith lead you to [instruct the poor] with affection and zeal, because these children are the members of Jesus Christ." Gratuity, so central to the structure of the De La Salle's endeavors, becomes a rich facet of their spirituality when they consider that it is not only a financial reality in the Lasallian school, but it brings them face to face with the theological reality of God's free gift of salvation - which Lasallian ministers make available to their students in their role as ambassadors of Christ.

#### 11. A Spirituality of Communion

Communion implies a particular kind of sharing, a deeper level of communication, a bond - all concepts that lead to a better understanding of association, which is at the heart of the common evangelical mission that unites all Lasallians. Subtle as it may seem, the significance of communion is not to be overlooked in Lasallian spirituality. As an aspect of any spirituality, communion brings into close proximity the divine and the human. This can be seen, as noted above, where those who embrace the spirituality of De La Salle see themselves as ambassadors of Christ and ministers to their students of the salvation he freely offers.

Communion is at the heart of community, the unspoken but lived reality that energizes those who create it and gives them a sense of solidarity. Lasallian spirituality, focused on the person of Jesus in others and the unfolding realization of the presence of God, enables Lasallian association to transcend a mere international confederation of teachers and become a holy force for good in the lives of countless young people across the face of the globe.

#### 12. A Spirituality of Dialogue

Any spirituality, as a relationship - a communion - with God, implies an ongoing dialogue. Lasallian spirituality takes this element of dialogue and includes the students in the "conversation" between teacher and God. Thus, it is a spirituality that is other-directed rather than me-directed. Citing the Old Testament image of Jacob's Ladder in the sixth of his Meditations for the Time of Retreat, the teachers are like the angels going to and coming from God. The prayer of

Lasallians is, then, an opportunity for them to take to God the needs of their students, and to bring back to their students the "replies" of God.

Another example of this can be found in his Meditation for the Eve of the Ascension where, for De La Salle, prayer is a dialogue on behalf of the students modelled on Jesus' prayers for his disciples. Here he highlights the Last Supper discourse of John's Gospel where Jesus prays that his disciples be kept from sin, that they be given a share in the divine holiness, and that there be union among them. This element of union is so significant for De La Salle that he wants it to resemble the communion of the Trinity because it is the ultimate symbol of union and association, the ultimate model for Lasallian ministry, and the source of its blessing and consecration.

### 13. A Spirituality of Empowerment

In their spirituality, Lasallians cooperate with God in the work of their students' salvation. They celebrate the God who empowers them as instruments and mediators of his saving gifts. As instruments of God - tools in the hands of God - they communicate for and with their students in their role as ambassadors. Their message from God is a message of hope, of love, and of dignity and respect which empowers their students to see themselves as fashioned in the image and likeness of God and worthy of his love. Not only does this perspective touch on the spiritual realm, but in the Lasallian school it has the potential to shape the curriculum and the very education the students receive - all of which gives meaning and purpose to Lasallian association.

### 14. A Spirituality of Thanksgiving

Lasallian spirituality is also a spirituality of thankfulness - an attitude significant in De La Salle's spiritual writing: the teachers are thankful for the goodness of God in calling them and sending them forth; they are thankful for the "wonderful works of God" which they perform for their students; they give thanks for God's intervention on behalf of youth; they are thankful for the good effects of their teaching and the benefits of their good example for their students; they are thankful for preserving their students from evil; and they are thankful for sharing in the teaching ministry of Christ and his apostles.

### 15. Touching Hearts



Finally, De La Salle tells his disciples that there is a kind of barometer as to how this spirituality has practical implications: theirs is a ministry wherein they "must touch hearts". As an aspect of their spirituality, this is so central to them because it opens onto the very purpose of the Institute, and their calling as Lasallians: the salvation of their students. At the same time, this touching of hearts is a gift of God's Spirit and it necessitates a kind of conversion. In his Meditation for the Feast of Pentecost, the Founder's words are very clear:

You carry out a work that requires you to touch hearts, but this you cannot do except by the Spirit of God. Pray to him to give you today the same grace he gave the holy apostles, and ask him that, after filling you with his Holy Spirit to sanctify yourselves, he also communicate himself to you in order to procure the salvation of others.

The spirituality embraced by Lasallians today is nourishing not only because its energy flows from a relationship with the living God, but because it is a spirituality of communion, of belonging. It is a spirituality that enshrines itself in their love and affection for the students God sends them. For the students they are guides, for them they are older brothers and sisters. However, as noted above, they are also saved and brought to God by their students! But for this, a certain "Lasallian humility" is needed, a realization that God works in mysterious ways - not only through them, but also through their students. As much as they evangelize their students, the students evangelize them. Thus, their schools are communities of the Spirit where students are loved and respected - particularly the poor. In his Meditation for the feast of the Epiphany, De La Salle urges his disciples to recognize and to adore Jesus in them!

For Lasallians, then, theirs is a spirituality wherein they bring to realization for their students the gift of the calling they have received - for them and from them. This realization infuses all their interactions with their students. At the same time, as they listen to the voice of God calling and creating within them - a voice they also hear through their students, they also urge them to hear the voice of God's Spirit which calls deeply within them, too. Again, in his Meditation for Epiphany, De La Salle writes:

God graciously spoke to Samuel, because three times in a row as soon as he heard God's voice, he presented himself to listen to

him. St. Paul merited to be entirely converted because he was at once faithful to the voice of Jesus Christ who called him. You should do just as they did.

### Conclusion

At the end of the 1987 Rule, the following Article (146) gives a sense of perspective not only to the vitality of the Institute but to the spiritual heritage of the Founder from which the Institute and all who belong to it in varying degrees draw meaning.

The spiritual gifts which the Church has received in St. John Baptist De La Salle go far beyond the confines of the Institute which he founded. The Institute sees the existence of the various Lasallian movements as a grace from God renewing its own vitality. The Institute associates with itself lay people who want to lead the life of perfection that the Gospel demands, by living according to the spirit of the Institute and by participating in its mission.

The "spiritual gifts" to which this Article refers include the spirituality which calls itself Lasallian and which the Brothers and their associated colleagues follow and share. It is a gift which bonds those who claim it to the Founder - and to each other. And this bond is nothing less than the presence of God who, in the words of the Rule (Art. 6), is an "endless sustenance." In dialogue with God, with each other, and with their students, Lasallians today are filled with the same Spirit who sustained the Founder, who sustains the Institute, and who continues to call them from out of their depths to answer with the witness of their lives the "Forever!" when any Lasallian proclaims the essence of their spirituality by saying: "Live Jesus in our hearts!"

For your continuing reflection and sharing

De La Salle states that your students "are a letter which Christ dictates to you, which you write each day in their hearts, not with ink, but by the Spirit of the living God." In what way(s) do you write this letter? If someone asked you to write a letter down, what would it say? (Section 1) (How does this enhance your sense of association with other Lasallians?)

In what way is your relationship with your students an element of your experience of the holy or the sacred? (Section 4) (How

does this enhance your sense of association with other Lasallians?)

In what way(s) is the story of your life journey woven together with the story of God? (Section 5) (How does this enhance your sense of association with other Lasallians?)

In what way(s) do you bring God to your students? In what way(s) do your students bring God to you? (Section 8) (How does this enhance your sense of association with other Lasallians?)

In what way(s) do you carry out De La Salle's injunction to touch the hearts of your students? In what way(s) do your students touch your heart? (Section 15) (How does this enhance your sense of association with other Lasallians?)

In what way(s) is your association with other Lasallians enhanced by the spirituality of De La Salle as you experience it?

## Conclusion

### Lasallian Identity Today: A Differentiated Identity

Robert Comte, FSC

This dossier is attached in order to highlight the essential elements of Lasallian identity around the poles of mission, consecration and spirituality with community and association being seen as the transverse dimension of this identity.

The novelty of this present situation is that this Lasallian identity, until only recently seen as the exclusive property of the Brothers, is nowadays claimed by also by individuals or groups of lay people. The actual diversity of Lasallians is the sign that the family includes newcomers whom the Brothers did not ever expect. To be Lasallian has become a sign of recognition, each in their particular way sharing the same identity. All draw their inspiration from the same source and endeavor to nourish their lives from it, especially their identity as educators.

This awareness of belonging to the Lasallian family is first of all translated by their work in educational institutions which have been often chosen for this reason. We know also that lay people more explicitly live various forms of association with the Brothers or among themselves, in very different ways (not forgetting the older realities of two congregations of religious women and the secular institute basing themselves on the Lasallian spirit, as well as the groups of Signum Fidei or the Lasallian Fraternity previously known as the Lasallian Third order).

The very diversity of initiatives in different parts of the world, as well as the experimental period the Institute has given itself on this point since the last General Chapter (cf. Chapter Acts, p.9) makes us hesitate in defining the different Lasallian identities coming into being. The question is even more complex because of the need to take into account the diverse affiliations of lay Lasallians in different parts of the world.

In any case, one point is clear: neither the Brothers, nor the Institute as such, can claim the exclusive rights to the Lasallian heritage. This heritage from now on is shared with others even if the Brothers remain with a particular but by no

means exclusive title of being "the heart, the memory and the guarantee" of this heritage. In the long run, the interpretation of the heritage will draw from the diversity of the Lasallian family.

Something to be carefully avoided is that either group understand their respective identities only by noting the differences, as though one group had something not possessed by the others or even considering themselves superior (such as Brothers in relation to some associated lay people or these latter in comparing themselves with others who have not made a formal commitment). Let us try to situate this relationship between one and the other in two ways which moreover do not completely overlap.

We could say in the first place that certain members, while living fundamentally the same thing as others, become a sign for them of what they are called to live. They express by a public gesture (different from that of the Brothers or of the associates) the meaning that this commitment gives to their lives and in a special way to their educational activity. They do not necessarily do anything more or different from others: they dare to say, in the name of what or of whom they are doing what they do. Not everyone is called to this form of expression, but their call is a call to everyone to go to the very origin of their action. The majority will never make such a gesture but among themselves it their recognition of themselves working within the Lasallian inspiration and in harmony with it.

It could also be said that both Brothers and lay people give a different emphasis to their lives. By their style of life, the lay groups give more emphasis to their being present in this world in their step of incarnation shown in their family life as well as in their social or political commitments. The Brothers, on the other hand, express rather more the utopian or prophetic aspect through the mediation of their lives as Brothers, inspired by the first Christian communities. It could be said that they witness to a hope that goes beyond the present and is a reminder of the eschatological dimension of human destiny. But it is simply a different emphasis. In their fully incarnated existence, lay persons cannot forget that their destiny is accomplished only through an eschatological hope: the Brothers cannot forget that they are fully incarnated in this world (they even claim to work in institutions the social meaning of which is critical).

In the coming years, both groups will have to learn to live in this new context. The Brothers will have to accept these newcomers into the family\ without feeling that they have been dispossessed of what they considered themselves as the only heirs: the lay people will have to find their full stature alongside the Brothers without being only a pale copy of them. We could ask if we are not all being called out of the logic of having (where each hangs on to what is considered his identity) in order to enter into a logic of gift (each considering to give and receive in turn) as this is the best way of fully recognizing one another.