

LASALLIAN ASSOCIATION FOR MISSION
1679 – 2007
a personal reflection on an ongoing story

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In a recent article entitled *Lasallian Association: The Ongoing Story*, Brother Antonio Botana, Secretary of the *International Commission on Association* and of its secretariat, cited several passages from *Live Today our Founding Story*, my pastoral letter of January 1, 2000. In that letter I stated that succeeding generations of Brothers have *lived the story* of John Baptist de La Salle and his first disciples in their own concrete historical circumstances. I stated further that *living the story* in our unique situation today is the challenge Brothers, partners, and associates face.

It is somewhat surprising, however, that I am writing an essay entitled *Lasallian Association for Mission*. When I composed that pastoral letter, I was not yet convinced that *association* was the most appropriate and effective umbrella expression for the international communion of persons living the Lasallian charism in various ways and depths. I am convinced today. Nevertheless, the views I express in this essay and the interpretations I give as a non-expert to important historical moments are strictly personal and open to correction and further development. Moreover, although I have been permitted more space than the other contributors to this collection, this treatment of *association* is not comprehensive. We need to consider *association* in the light of an in-depth study of our specific vows. We need also to examine the relationship between *association* and *charism*, as well as the relationship between *association* and the promotion of the Reign of God. My limited purpose is to offer a few reflections in the hope that they contribute to the ongoing dialogue on *Lasallian Association for Mission*.

International Committee on Vows, 1975

As long ago as 1975 the *International Committee on the Vows* suggested that “the time is ripe to restore the concept of *association* to its full vigor as a central value for the Brothers.” (*The Vows of Religion and the Brothers*, pp. 32-33) The committee further suggested that the Brothers could appropriately profess only one vow, a vow of *association*, a comprehensive vow that would include the obligations of the traditional vows. Even more pertinent to the topic of this paper, the committee stated, with astute foresight, that *association* might be a useful term for expressing the unity among persons living Lasallian mission in very diverse ways.

We note immediately, however, a dual understanding of the word *association*. One expresses the consecrated vowed life of the Brothers, and the other the international communion of all Lasallians, Brothers included. It is important that we recognize these two diverse meanings of *association*. Similarly we need to be aware of the way the word *association* is used in contemporary society. The term refers to groups or organizations that have specific objectives and promote unity in pursuing those objectives, but do not require the kind of total commitment that the vow of association required of De La Salle and the early Brothers. People belong to a number of

associations. Commitments that issue from these memberships do not represent, at least ordinarily, their primary life commitments.

Association, De La Salle, and the early Brothers

The consecration of the Founder and the first Brothers, on the other hand, was total. It represented their primary commitment in life, against which all other commitments were measured. Having consecrated themselves explicitly and entirely to God, the Brothers declared their intention of living that consecration by *associating* for an educational mission to the poor. Nobody can read the early biographies and not recognize that their consecration was total. They pledged to live a highly structured religious community life, to go wherever they were sent, and to do anything they were asked to do in pursuit of the objectives of the new society. They resolved to persevere in association as Brothers, even if obliged to beg and live on bread alone. There is no ambiguity about what living and working *together and by association* meant to these pioneers.

Other meanings of association

We have to take into consideration other contemporary understandings of “association.” The Church recognizes “associations of the Christian faithful,” diverse groups of married or single persons that lead an apostolic life and strive for holiness “while living in the world.” The word “association” in this context distinguishes such groups from institutes of consecrated life. The usage, therefore, is fundamentally different from that of John Baptist de La Salle and the early Brothers.

In recent years Brothers and lay partners have proposed that we recognize and accept new meanings of Lasallian *association* and have promoted the creation of *associations*. Often, however, they do not make explicit and precise reference to our historical use of the term *association*. Despite the lack of precision, the last General Chapter responded positively to this movement, encouraging the development of new forms of groups or *associations*. Some Regions and Districts have already given recognition to new forms of *associations* – including a well-defined organization of Lasallian *Associates*, groups of past participants of renewal programs, members of commissions committed to the education of the poor, and communities with Brother and lay membership. Nevertheless, clear and consistent criteria for recognition of emerging groups have not yet been established, at least internationally.

A significant number of religious institutes today share their charism with persons they call “associates” or “associate members.” It is interesting to recall that in 1976 the 40th General Chapter opened the door to different ways of *belonging* to the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. The proposition welcomed not only men who wish to be *associated* with our apostolic activity, but also those who want to share our community life without having to make religious profession. (*Circ. 406*, pp. 20-21) During that Chapter the first members of *Signum Fidei* made a public commitment in the presence of all the capitulants. It was years later, however, that Lasallian volunteers in some areas of the Institute began to share the community and apostolic life of the Brothers (as distinct from living in the community residence as guests).

In the last ten years or so the Lasallian world has identified three groups of persons living Lasallian mission: Brothers, partners, and associates. The line of demarcation between partners and associates has not been clearly defined. I had suggested in my pastoral letter that the term *associates* might be reserved for those living their Lasallian commitment as members of a recognized Lasallian group, such as *Signum Fidei*. The General Chapter, however, decided that individuals strongly committed to Lasallian spirituality and mission over a significant number of years also merit the appellation of *associates*, whether or not they are members of groups. I am in complete agreement with this position.

Given these varied and even conflicting understandings of **association, associations, associates, associate members**, I was doubtful that the word *association* was the best word to promote as an expression of our international communion. I was convinced, however, that *family – Lasallian Family* precisely - was a tired expression and too generic. I was convinced also that we had moved beyond the notion of *shared mission*. I am aware, however, that I was then and probably still am, in the minority on both positions. Nevertheless, I found myself searching for a term – and unsatisfied with expressions that occurred to me or that others proposed.

“Associated for the educational service of the poor”

I owe my acceptance of the term *association* to the Preparatory Commission of the 43rd General Chapter. The commission proposed the following to the Superior and General Council as the theme of the Chapter: *associated for the educational service of the poor as the Lasallian response to the challenges of the 21st Century*. While I cannot be certain of the motives of members of the commission, I think the major thrust of the theme was the *educational service of the poor*. The precise meaning of the word *associated* was not, at least as I recall, addressed.

The General Chapter accepted the theme – and, thanks to certain capitulants and in contrast with what frequently happens to themes at chapters and congresses - never allowed *associated for the educational service of the poor* to fade from the consciousness of the participants. I knew that the Chapter’s acceptance of the theme resolved my perplexity. *Associated* had to be interpreted to mean all persons participating in Lasallian mission in serious but diverse ways and depths. Since at that time the Brothers constituted only 4% of those in Lasallian mission, it would have made no sense to think of the Brothers only as *associated*. Nor could the word refer only to those belonging to groups or associations, or limited to those called *associates*. *Association* had to be understood as an umbrella expression.

Association in the early Institute

In an essay on *association* published in *Lasalliana*, (N. 49, Art. 14-19, 1999) Brother Michel Sauvage wrote that there is no existing use of the word *association* in Lasallian writing prior to 1691. He says that even after 1691 the term is found only seven times. John Baptist de La Salle uses variations of the expression a few additional times, but in speaking of founders of other religious congregations and of marriage.

How then explain the centrality of the word *association* among Lasallians today? Brothers will have no difficulty in answering this question. From the early days of the Institute Brothers have professed their consecration to God employing a formula that has transmitted the notion of *association* throughout our history – in reference, however, to the Brothers. In this formula each Brother has promised to “unite myself and to remain in society with the Brothers of the Christian Schools, who are *associated* to keep together and by *association* gratuitous schools.” “Schools at the service of the poor” replaced “gratuitous schools” in 1967.

The first use of the word *association* that we know of took place in 1691. « Perplexed,» according to his biographer with a series of setbacks that lead him to question whether God wanted him to continue or not, De La Salle, with two of his most important and trusted disciples, professed a “vow of *association and union* to procure the establishment of the Society of the Christian Schools.” This vow manifested first, their discernment that God wanted them to forge ahead, and second, their commitment to procure the establishment of the Society even if they had to beg and live on bread alone. This vow is called, appropriately, the “Heroic Vow.”

1694: “I promise and vow ... *association*”

Brother Maurice Auguste Hermans calls the event of June 6, 1694, the “Act of Association.” (*Circ. 406*, pp.53ff) Brother Michel Sauvage calls it the “Foundation of the Association.” (*Lasalliana*, N. 49, Art. 15)

John Baptist de La Salle and twelve Brothers consecrate themselves to God for life, the first to make perpetual vows. Each begins by consecrating himself entirely to the Holy Trinity. Then he declares his intention to live that consecration by vowing to unite himself and to remain in society with the others *to keep together and by association gratuitous schools*. The formula each used was far more than a ceremonial listing of vows. Its profound and eloquent composition enabled the Founder and Brothers to express a clear understanding of their vocation and to proclaim their determination to respond wholeheartedly. (How blessed we are that these thirteen signed formulas are preserved in our archives.)

Towards the end of the text, the formula gives a name to the vow “to unite myself and to remain in society with ...” It calls it a vow of *association*. Since this vow clearly revealed who De La Salle and the Brothers understood themselves to be, I do not hesitate to call it a *vow of identity*. In addition to *association* they vowed stability, a pledge to persevere whatever the future held for them. They vowed obedience, proclaiming their availability to go wherever they were sent and to do whatever they were asked to do by the *Body of the society*, an expression that speaks volumes about the nature of their *association*. The writings of the Founder and of his biographers leave us in no doubt whatsoever that the Brothers lived celibate community life and a life of poverty that we can only regard with amazement and admiration. But they did not make vows of celibate chastity and poverty.

The morning following their perpetual vows, John Baptist de La Salle and the twelve Brothers gathered at the Founder’s insistence to elect the Superior. De La Salle clearly wanted one of the Brothers to assume this responsibility. He presented them with cogent reasons. Nevertheless, from the beginning of the meeting, the Brothers

manifested their desire that he continue. Yielding to his insistence, however, they agreed to vote by secret ballot. Every Brother voted for De La Salle. His biographer describes the Founder's reaction as one of disbelief and irritation. He pleaded with them to vote again. Without prior discussion they again voted unanimously that he continue. The mutual solidarity of the Brothers, their sense of *association* as the *Body of the Society*, led them to take a strong and courageous stance. Although disappointed, De La Salle accepted the decision, but only on condition that never again would a priest head the Society. The twelve Brothers sign a remarkable document, also preserved in our archives. Not only does this precious document reveal their conviction regarding future Superiors, it reveals that they had indeed become an *association* and were ready to speak as the *Body of the Society*. (Italics are added.)

We the undersigned, (names of each follow), after *associating* ourselves with Monsieur J.B. de La Salle, priest, to keep together the Gratuitous Schools by the vows which we pronounced yesterday, declare that as a consequence of these vows and of the *association* we have formed by them, we have chosen as our Superior Monsieur J.B. de La Salle, to whom we promise obedience and entire submission, as well as to those whom he will assign to us as our superiors. We also declare that it is our understanding that the present election will not have the force of a precedent for the future. Our intention is that after the said Monsieur de La Salle, and forever in the future, no one shall be received among us or chosen as Superior who is a priest or who has received Holy Orders, and we will not have or accept any Superior who has not *associated* himself with us and has not made vows like us and like all those who will be *associated* with us in the future. Done at Vaugirard on 7 June 1694. (quoted in *The Work is Yours*, pp.83-84)

“To whom God has united me ...”

John Baptist de La Salle himself had interiorized *association*: he was *associated* with the Brothers. He belonged to the Society. That sense of belonging led him to respond positively to the Brothers when they called him back from Parmenie in virtue of the commitment he had made to the Society. In his “Testament,” we find this poignant phrase: “I entrust first my soul to God and then all the Brothers of the Society of the Christian Schools *to whom he has united me.*” (*Rules and Foundational Documents*, p.205) The French word for united, *uni*, is sometimes translated “associated,” a translation which, while not literal, is faithful to the Founder's meaning.

The Bull of Approbation

In 1726, seven years after the death of John Baptist de La Salle, the Holy See granted the request of the Brothers for recognition and approval. The approval was expressed in the Bull of Approbation. Henceforth, the Brothers would profess vows of poverty, chastity, obedience, stability, and to teach gratuitously. Although *association* is not mentioned as an explicit vow, the concept is in no way missing from the formula. The Brothers continued to promise – and in the formula of 1726 still said *and vow* – “to unite myself and to remain in society with the Brothers of the Christian Schools who are *associated* to keep *together and by association* gratuitous schools.” The second paragraph of the formula of consecration has never changed from 1694 to the present

time – except for the disappearance of the words *and vow* and the modification of “gratuitous schools.”

Lasallian Association for Mission: 1679 to circa 1950

From the early days of the Institute to circa 1950, the Brothers of the Christian Schools themselves lived Lasallian Association for Mission with minimal assistance of lay *men* (literally). The model of *association* was the **Brothers’ School Model**, that is to say, lay men helped the Brothers run the Brothers’ school. Language in documents of the 1946 General Chapter indicate that when immediate and urgent needs dictated, the Brothers could employ male (only) lay teachers, but their presence was tolerable at best. Thanks to new and creative theological thinking in the decade preceding Vatican II, more positive attitudes on the place and role of the laity in the Church developed. This movement contributed to the gradual acceptance in our Institute of male and female teachers, co-institutional schools, and eventually, coeducational schools.

This new thinking permeated Vatican II in the early 1960s, resulting in the Council’s strong and explicit assertion that all the baptized are called to holiness and to participation in the mission of the Church. This declaration confronted the erroneous but widespread assumption that holiness and responsibility for Church ministries belonged almost exclusively to the domain of priests and religious. Our own General Chapter of 1966-1967 made this new thinking its own, declaring that the Brothers are “happy to collaborate with the laity” (*Declaration*, 46.3) and that lay men and women should be involved in the whole life of the school. Nevertheless, the Chapter stated without ambiguity that the community of Brothers was “the soul” of the school and responsible for “giving it life” and for keeping the mission on course. (*Declaration*, 48.6) In other words the model was still the **Brothers’ School Model**: responsibility for the character of the school belonged to the Brothers; the laity were to help the Brothers run the Brothers’ school.

Crisis

What happened following Vatican II and the 39th General Chapter was not generally anticipated. Many Brothers were happy with the striking changes in the Church and Institute. But the *aggiornamento* or “updating” left some Brothers disoriented, others disillusioned, still others discouraged, and not-a-few feeling “liberated” from commitments they had never really internalized. Withdrawals were many. The number of postulants and novices declined rapidly. Polarization developed on many issues. Confidence in religious life in general, in our life in particular, and even in Catholic schools was shaken.

This is not the place to attempt an in-depth analysis of the tumultuous decade that followed Vatican II and the 39th General Chapter. But it is the place to recognize the impact of the dramatic shift in the number of Brothers and number of lay men and women in the schools. The **Brothers’ School Model** we had known – a relatively small number of lay teachers helping the Brothers run their schools – had changed significantly. We now had a small number of Brothers being “assisted” by a large number of lay teachers. The **Brothers’ School Model** no longer made sense. Brothers recognized that they could not create authentically Lasallian schools by themselves.

They were frustrated and even angry. Lay men and women, some of them in administrative positions of leadership, became increasingly aware that it no longer made sense to perceive themselves as “back-up” staff or “auxiliary helpers,” or for the Brothers and parents to perceive them as such.

While the following dates are only indicative, I think that much creative thinking occurred in the Institute between 1974 and 1984. Out of what I believe was a complex process of synergy – guided by the Holy Spirit – a new way of thinking emerged. We began to talk about **Lasallian Schools** rather than **Brothers’ Schools**. Brothers and lay teachers started perceiving themselves as members of educational communities. A new **MODEL** was set in motion: the **Lasallian School Model**. In this model lay men and women no longer perceived themselves or were perceived as helping the Brothers run the Brothers’ school. Rather, Brothers and lay together assumed responsibility to work “together and by association” to make schools authentically Lasallian. They embarked together on what the French described appropriately as an “adventure.”

The 41st General Chapter in 1986 endorsed the **Lasallian School Model** and inserted several new pages into the *Rule* of the Brothers. Editors entitled the new section “shared mission,” a phrase that quickly captured the imagination of the Lasallian world. In unambiguous language the Chapter declared: “The Brothers’ community is ever mindful that its apostolic activity takes place within an educational community in which all the functions, including positions of responsibility, are shared.” In consequence of this orientation, the Brothers are called to foster a spirit of collaboration and to make known to the educational community the essential elements of the Lasallian heritage. (*Rule*, 17-17d)

Throughout the Lasallian world Brothers and lay men and women began to see themselves in a new way: as persons taking “ownership” of Lasallian mission and living that mission in accord with their diverse life commitments. The participation of non-FSC consultants in the General Chapter of 1993 helped the Chapter break new ground. In positive language participants described *shared mission* as a new chapter in the history of the Institute. It declared to the Brothers that a “way of looking upon ourselves as the authorized agents of the Institute’s mission is obsolete. In our unified commitment to mission there is diversity of vocations.” (*Circ. 435*, pp.8-9)

From 1993 to 2000 the Lasallian world witnessed a remarkable acceptance of this new self-understanding. Lasallians set in motion a level of networking on District, Regional, and International levels never before seen in our history. Moreover, the Generalate, Regions, and Districts developed new and effective programs of Lasallian formation.

43rd General Chapter: 2000

We return where we began: the 43rd General Chapter. This Chapter expressed and at the same time nourished the international communion of Brothers, partners, and associates, persons collaborating in Lasallian mission while living the Lasallian charism in distinct ways. The Chapter recognized that this collaboration demanded participation in decision-making and called for mission councils in every District. These councils were to grant voice and vote to Brothers, partners, and associates and to determine mission directions for the District. Moreover the Chapter called for an

International Assembly on Lasallian Association for Mission to propose directions for our worldwide mission. This assembly was to be held prior to the General Chapter of 2007.

LS Association for Mission: a bold venture, a venture grounded in realism and in faith

In the “Testament” from which I quoted earlier, John Baptist de La Salle revealed that faith enabled him to know that God had united him to the Brothers. (*Rules and Foundational Documents*, p.205) I believe that our Founder would not hesitate to declare today that God is uniting him not only to the Brothers, but also to partners and associates. He would agree that the charism or spiritual gift that he received for the salvation of youth goes “beyond the confines of the Institute that he founded.” (*Rule*, art. 146) He would readily recognize that God is leading Brothers, partners, and associates into *association for mission*.

De La Salle shared with us his conviction that Providence had established the first Christian Schools and the *association* of Brothers that made them a reality. (*MR* 193) I believe that we can affirm with confidence that Providence in our day – that is to say, God, in loving concern for the education of children and youth, especially those “poor, abandoned, and far from salvation” - calls Brothers, partners, and associates *to live today, together and by association, our founding story*, to live today **LASALLIAN ASSOCIATION FOR MISSION**.