

Association: The Policy of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1950–2000

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We are indebted to Vatican Council II for having defined the Church as “The People of God,” in which all members are called to take an active part in announcing the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ. Since that time and on many occasions, the involvement of the laity in the Church’s mission has been abundantly proclaimed. Similarly, religious institutes have been urgently encouraged to share their charism with the lay partners committed with them to the apostolic work the Church confides to them. The synod “Consecrated Life in the Church and in the world,” which was held in 1994, is very clear on this point (*Vita Consecrata* 54–56).

At the same time, we have seen some laypeople, individually or in groups, express the desire to be associated with an institute to share in its apostolic plan and spirituality. Many religious congregations took these longings seriously and showed themselves open and receptive to these requests, thus recognizing that their charism is not their exclusive property but a gift for the entire Church. Numerous forms of association with different features were born within religious families.

For several years now, the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, as such, has been resolutely involved in this general and irreversible movement. It has done so with more or less vigor and success according to the regions where it is located, not always knowing

how to translate into actual situations the intentions and orientations over that period of time, clearly affirmed by the Rule of the Brothers, the General Chapters, and the Superiors.

Based on some significant official texts of the Institute, I would like to show what the teaching of the Brothers has been on this matter over the course of the last fifty years.

1. From “necessary evil” to “great family”

For a long time the Brothers ran their schools “together and by association,” excluding any presence of lay teachers. When they welcome a restricted number of them in the first half of the twentieth century, it is because they cannot do otherwise. Even in 1946—a difficult time for the Institute—a Commission asks the General Chapter “as a matter of urgency, to do away with the practice of employing females, which had developed here and there because of the circumstances of the war” and “to reduce as far as possible the employment of laymen.”

The Declaration of 1967

At the General Chapter of 1966–67, a totally different outlook is evident regarding the presence of laypeople in “the Brothers’ schools.” The *Declaration*, produced by this Chapter and entitled *The Brother of the Christian Schools in the World Today*, expresses it:

A conference presented to the European Commission for Lasallian Formation, Rome, 2–4 November 2000.

The school will be molded into a community only through a community of teachers rich in diversity and the unity of its members. For this reason the Brothers are happy to collaborate with lay teachers, who bring to the teaching community an irreplaceable contribution that comes from their knowledge of the world, their experience in family life, civic affairs, and labor organizations. The Brothers act in such a way as to guarantee that the lay teachers are involved in the whole life of the school: with the catechesis, apostolic movements, extra-curricular activities, as well as in administration and matters of policy. (46.3)

A lot of time will be required for this text to penetrate mindsets and modify behavior, to such an extent that Brother Superior John Johnston writes to the Brothers on 1 January 1993:

Most of us have moved beyond the stage of considering lay men and women as “necessary evils.” But I am not sure that most of us have moved beyond the stage of considering them as “inferiors” who require our direction. I think that we must avoid at all costs the creation of dependency relationships which are nothing less than a new version of “clerical-lay” relationships. (*Transformation; Reflections on Our Future*, 39)

The General Chapter of 1976

The General Chapter of 1976 is marked, among other things, by:

- the profound study of the significance of the vow of association at the origins of the Institute;
- the acceptance of the possibility of associating laypeople with the mission of the Institute;
- the act of consecration of the first members of the *Signum Fidei* movement, who committed themselves to live according to the charism of John Baptist de La Salle. (Today they

number more than 800 members in thirty countries.)

In the Message of the Capitulants, we read:

We also accept that laypeople and priests may be associated with the work of the Brothers and the spirituality which inspires it, through individual agreements which can go as far as a definite commitment.

(*Circular 402*, 29 June 1976)

As a follow-up, the Inter-Chapter Meeting of 1981 pays particular attention to the relationship with laypeople and goes beyond the aspects of our profession and mission to emphasize the sharing of our spirituality:

We are called to a new role: that of sharing our spirituality with laypeople whom we look upon as our equals. There has been a considerable development, therefore, since the not very distant days when we considered lay people simply as helpers we were forced to use because of the difficult circumstances of the times. . . . It is a new step that this assembly suggests we take, for although we associate many laypeople in our educational work and, somewhat less, in our mission, we have a tendency to consider our spirituality as a restricted domain.

(*Circular 415*)

The participants at this meeting return to the question of allowing laypeople to hold positions of responsibility, and they affirm: “The fact of being a Brother does not in itself qualify a person for a position of responsibility.”

In the following year, 1982, Brother José Pablo Basterrechea is the first Superior General to address a letter to “all those who feel, realize, and share with the Brothers the mission and the message of the Founder,” telling them, “I have a great desire . . . to write to you to express my gratitude and profound esteem. You constitute a large family.” (Letter of 15 May 1982)

After the death of Brother Pablo, his successor, Brother John Johnston, writes in 1995:

If today we talk spontaneously about “shared mission” and the “Lasallian family,” it is due in great measure to the vision and leadership of Brother Pablo.

(*Circular 439*, 10 October 1995)

2. From “Lasallian Family” to “Shared Mission”

The General Chapter of 1986

The General Chapter of 1986 marks the beginning of a decisive stage by presenting new perspectives that cannot be stated more clearly and with greater force. This is evident:

- in the decisions of the General Chapter and its Message to the Lasallian Family,
- in the new draft of the Brothers’ Rule,
- in the Letter to the Lasallian Family.

The Chapter returns to the necessity of effecting a change in the thinking of the Brothers, because the orientations given twenty years earlier still have difficulty being translated into reality—hence the insistence we find again in the Circular of 13 July 1986:

Whereas several decades ago we considered ourselves to be the owners of our work and establishments, today we are invited to see our work as a ministry to which the many laypeople who work with us are invited to participate. Thanks to this integration of Brothers and laypeople in a common project, our schools will be better and we will be able to offer the Church a service of highest quality.

It is interesting to note here:

- the importance given to the common project around which everyone unites,
- the efforts of laypeople on behalf of a higher-quality school to serve the Church.

The capitulants address a message to the Lasallian Family that I think still centers on the Institute itself. The message urges laypeople:

- to strengthen their relationships with the Brothers’ communities,
- to support the Institute’s educational and evangelizing mission,
- to help us to be attentive and faithful,
- to ask the Lord to make our Institute increase.

At the same time, the Chapter asks Brother Superior and his Council to produce a more detailed document addressed to the Lasallian Family. Some months after the Chapter, reporting on the present situation and speaking of their plan of work, Brother Superior and his Council write:

To demonstrate our conviction that the Lasallian Family movement must benefit from a high priority, we have appointed Brother Genaro, Vicar General, as Counselor for the Lasallian Family.

Furthermore, it will always be one of our primary concerns to help the Brothers understand this movement and their indispensable role in it.

(*Circular 423*, 18–19)

The Rule

One of the essential tasks of the General Chapter of 1986 is to rewrite the *Rule*, the result of a lengthy period of preparation. The Holy See approves it and “recognizes that the text is faithful to the charism of Saint John Baptist de La Salle and the traditions of his Institute” (Decree of 26 January 1987).

The innovations are the expression “shared mission,” which appears in the *Rule*, and along with it, the idea of the association of laypeople. Note these two articles:

The Brothers gladly associate lay persons with them in their educational mission. They provide, for those who so desire, the

means to learn about the Founder and to live according to his spirit. (Article 17)

The spiritual gifts which the Church has received in Saint 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 can associate with itself laypeople 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. (Article 146)

Although these two articles speak of laypeople and refer to them with the same verb, *associate*, it is appropriate to remark that in the first article they are associated with the educational mission, whereas in the second they are associated with the Institute. Although the first article seems to concern partners in a very broad sense, the second speaks about those who, while participating in the mission, also want to strive for evangelical perfection.

The Pastoral Letter of 1 January 1987

In his first pastoral letter to the Brothers, at the beginning of 1987, the new Superior General, Brother John Johnston, returns insistently to the evolution taking place in this area of association. I cite here some passages that seem to me to be of fundamental importance.

Our discussion of association so far is very incomplete. “A further, insistent call comes to us from the Lasallian Family” (The Message of the Chapter to the Brothers, 1986). The evolution of the “Lasallian Family” is one of the most important developments in the Institute today, one that demands our closest attention. (29)

The Brothers themselves, for some three hundred years, received, lived, and passed

on the Lasallian ideal, aided for a number of those years by men and women collaborators in important but secondary roles. (29)

This traditional model of FSC–lay collaboration has virtually collapsed everywhere. It neither can nor should continue to exist. It is not a question merely of the diminished number of Brothers. It is more the call to full apostolic participation of all Christians, and the willingness of so many highly motivated men and women to respond positively to the challenge. (29–30)

Lay teachers—as well as others associated with us—are expressing more and more their desire to participate actively in the Lasallian mission. (30)

Brother John adds a warning:

At all costs we must avoid a spirit of paternalism, condescension, and control (however subtle). To avoid this very dangerous pitfall, open and frank dialogue between the Brothers and those associated with them is essential. (31)

What is said is clear and determined.

The Letter to the Lasallian Family

The text that the General Chapter of 1986 decides to have addressed to the Lasallian Family is written in 1989. It is scarcely possible here to summarize this lengthy document of more than forty pages, but here are some chapter headings:

- Chapter 4—To be Lasallians Today: Some Priorities
- Chapter 5—Within the Rich Diversity of Our Groups
- Chapter 6—Varied but Associated
- Chapter 7—To Develop the Unity and Vitality of the Lasallian Family

This letter demonstrates a real spirit of openness and trust toward the various groups

of the Lasallian Family, and it invites them “to build for themselves a type of association that accurately reflects their own identity” (35).

We believe that we can and must live this spirit of association, although in different ways in the various groups described above, taking due account of their particular features and the variety of ties that unite the members. (33)

Then, listing some conditions for the effective living of this association, the letter realistically declares: “We do not think association will be easy” (34–35).

3. From “Shared Mission” to “Association”

The General Chapter of 1993

Already, in various places, men and women lay colleagues begin to be invited to participate in the work of District Chapters regarding the mission. But in 1993, the General Chapter itself sees for the first time in the history of the Institute the involvement of lay consultants, coming from all sectors of the Institute. With the Brothers who are capitulants, they devote a significant amount of time to reflect on the shared mission. Moreover, *Circular 435*, which presents to the Brothers the orientations of the Chapter, devotes twenty pages to this topic:

- The Institute at all levels is asked to make shared mission one of its priorities over the next seven years. (Proposition 4)
- This applies to each District and to individual communities and establishments.
- Each District is asked:
 - to make Lasallian formation for lay teachers and educators a fundamental priority;
 - to strengthen the means available (structures, personnel, and locations) for animating and coordinating the shared mission, and to do this through joint discernment among Brothers and lay colleagues;

—to invite lay colleagues to join in retreats, chapters, and assemblies.

- The educational plan of each establishment should be drawn up and evaluated by all members of the educational community.

- Each community is encouraged to use its annual project to put into motion what is needed to support shared mission. In the same way, each Brother is asked to include it in his personal project. (47–51)

The call to the Brothers is clear: “The time has passed for the idea that the Brothers are the only agents for the mission of the Institute” (9).

The Lasallian Mission of Human and Christian Education

It is also important to mention the major study done in 1997 at the request of the General Chapter, with publication and distribution entrusted to each Region of the Institute: *The Lasallian Mission of Human and Christian Education*.

The following brief passage conveys, I think, an objective overview of the suggested policy:

Association, such as it was lived by the Brothers, had a deep impact on the organization and functioning of their schools. It was a decisive factor in helping their cohesion, effectiveness, and creativity. Today, under new forms still to be invented, the same spirit of association should continue to inspire and give life to the Lasallian Schools where Lasallian colleagues are in the majority. The challenge now is for Brothers and other Lasallian educators to discover together in open dialogue how to found and promote in new foundations the associative dimensions of their commitment on behalf of the human and Christian education of the young, especially the poor. (3.31)

The Pastoral Letter of 1 January 2000

The final pastoral letter of Brother John Johnston to the Brothers, at the beginning of this year, is entitled: “The Challenge: Live Today Our Founding Story.” Brother Superior returns vigorously to the previous orientations about collaboration, partnership, and association between Brothers and laypeople that he encouraged throughout his two terms as the Superior of the Institute. He returns in particular to the important matter “of participation of the laity in decision-making and in accountability.” His position cannot be stated more exactly:

Clearly, “partnership” presupposes both. Our Lasallian Partners need a way to share in the determination and execution of policy regarding schools and works—and in the creation of new works. For this purpose we need suitable structures at every level. (52)

Brother John concludes with the following point:

Obviously the success of all aspects of this movement depends on the willingness of the laity to assume responsibility for the Lasallian character of our schools, the openness of the Brothers to partnership with the laity, and the organization of effective formation programs at the Institute, District, and school levels. (54)

Further on, he explains other aspects of the idea of association:

Some of our partners are manifesting a desire to become more closely and more formally associated with Lasallian mission and with the Institute. (56)

The interest manifested in various areas of the Institute merits a response. (57)

Of course we have to be clear that what we are talking about is a structure of association for those who are spiritually and

apostolically motivated. We are not talking about a “professional” organization. (57)

I believe very strongly that we should foster structures that will allow *Lasallian Partners*, if they wish, to become *Lasallian Associates*. (60)

We don’t want to propose to our lay partners a form of association that is in reality a “watered-down” version of the Brothers’ life. Such a proposal is paternalistic and a subtle form of “clericalism.” (61)

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

The road that leads from “partnership” to “association” is henceforth generally clear. The General Chapter of 2000, in its turn, takes up and gives official support to Brother John Johnston’s message.

The General Chapter of 2000

The directives and decisions of the 2000 General Chapter concerning partnership and association henceforth serve as the basis for our reflection and action. Without pretending to cite them all, I would like to insist on two aspects: the clarifications made by the Chapter and the propositions it voted. The clarifications refer to persons and to groups.

The Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools

- The Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools is the first form of association willed by John Baptist de La Salle; therefore, the Brothers must constantly question the manner in which they are associated with one another, by vow, for the mission.
- But the development of the Lasallian mission requires that the Institute:

- allow itself to be stimulated by the dynamic movements that manifest themselves today, both with partners and with associates;
- encourage and support the sharing among collaborators and with the Brothers, so that all can deepen their personal understanding of association.

Partners (colleagues)

These are people who in fact share our mission in all its aspects: professional, educational, catechetical, and apostolic. They enable the mission to be accomplished.

Associates

Various types of association are possible: some concern individuals; others involve groups. Some partners have traveled a long road of collaboration in the Lasallian mission and sense a call to deepen their Lasallian charism, spirituality, and communion. They live by, or want to live by, a certain number of Lasallian characteristics:

- a vocation related to the charism of Saint John Baptist de La Salle,
- a life of faith that discovers God in reality in the light of the Scriptures,
- an experience of community lived in various ways and according to each person's identity,
- a mission that associates them in the educational service of the poor and implies a certain duration,
- a universal openness that transcends the individual and the local situation.

Individuals

According to their type of commitment, individuals can be associated with a community or a District by mutual agreement. If they wish, they can express the desire to associate themselves with the Institute in a more formal way. It is then up to Brother Visitor and his Council to acknowledge them as associates.

Intentional groups

These are groups of people, responding to an inner call, who choose to associate themselves and to live according to certain Lasallian characteristics in various ways and periods of time. For intentional Lasallian groups, three conditions are necessary:

- presence of some clearly evident Lasallian characteristics,
- explicit commitment to young people and the poor,
- authorization for a precise period of time by an official act of Brother Visitor and his Council.

Certain intentional groups are autonomous with respect to the Institute of the Brothers, such as the Lasallian Guadalupanas Sisters and the Lasallian Sisters of Vietnam.

Others have an organic relation with the Institute, for example, *Signum Fidei* and the Lasallian Third Order.

Other intentional groups can create themselves, for example, among Young Lasallians, Lasallian Volunteers, Lasallian Communities, Lasallian Teams, and so on.

Propositions of the 2000 General Chapter

With regard to Brothers

- The Brothers are invited to deepen their understanding of their vow of association for the service of the poor. A year in the period after the chapter is to be particularly dedicated to this theme.
- An inter-chapter commission is to study the identity and role of the Brother in the Lasallian educational mission.

With regard to the development of Partnership and Association

- Promote the creation and development of groups of partners and/or associates and of Brothers—or of partners and/or associates among themselves—that reflect on their identity in relation to the Lasallian mission and develop forms of association.

- Evaluate and strengthen existing experiences of guiding and supporting partnership in Lasallian works.

- Encourage, support, and evaluate new forms of partnership and association that lead to new forms of commitment to the service of the poor.

With regard to formation

- During the period between Chapters, the center of the Institute is to organize two sessions for people in charge of formation that incorporate the dimension of association for the educational service of the poor.

- The plans of Lasallian formation in the Institute ensure that they include an experience of insertion in the field of educational service of the poor.

With regard to structures (in Districts and in the Institute)

- In the Districts, the Brothers and their associates create (where they do not exist) or strengthen an organizational structure that is responsible for the Lasallian educational mission, in which all participate with deliberative voice.

- The criteria for participation by Brothers and their associates in this structure are to be determined by the District Chapter or by the Visitor and his Council, in dialogue with the associates.

- A "Permanent Council of Brothers and Partners" for the Lasallian mission and an "International Assembly for the Lasallian Educational Mission" are created.

- An international meeting of Brothers, Partners, and Associates is to take place in 2004 to share, analyze, and evaluate the forms of association and to suggest lines of action for the 2007 General Chapter.

Conclusion

We can say that the 2000 General Chapter not only blesses the orientations taken by those that preceded it, regarding the sharing of mis-

sion and responsibility within the framework of the Lasallian Family, but also invites us to intensify research and experimentation in new forms of association. I also point out that there is an intention not to separate reflection and experience. Both must enrich and nourish each other by remaining in continual dialogue.

But the 2000 General Chapter does not sort out all the ambiguities about the place and the role of the Institute, on the one hand, and lay partners and associates, on the other, in association. It seems to me that important work remains to be done with a certain urgency and a great deal of realism in our countries of Europe, starting from the actual situations in which we find ourselves.