

The Vow of Association, the Heart of the Brother's Identity

For Community Discussion

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1. THE STORY CONTINUES

1.1 The recovery of our awareness of "associates."

The central part of our vow formula has always contained the basic substance of our vow of association for the educational service of the poor, even when it was not specifically pronounced in the third part of the formula (from 1726 until 1986). Nevertheless, since 1726 attention was diverted from that central part to remain polarized in the third part, with the traditional vows of religious life centered around the so called "evangelical counsels."

Since the 39th General Chapter (1966 - 1967) there has been a simultaneous progression of the awareness that lay persons also participate in the Lasallian charism, even associating themselves with the Institute of the Brothers for the Lasallian mission, and the awareness of the meaning and importance of the vow of association in the consecration and the identity of the Brother.

The General Chapter of 2000 was the pinnacle of this double progression: at the same time as association is being openly proposed to lay persons, the Brother is invited to think about his own identity from the perspective of the vow of association. The event of 1694 was highlighted, the consecration of John Baptist de La Salle and twelve Brothers, by means of the vow of association for the educational service of the poor, as the axis around which the entire Lasallian story revolves, including the new chapter which is beginning to be written. Throughout the Acts of the Chapter (Circular 447) there appear several attention-getting calls so that we Brothers might recover this awareness:

- *"The foundation event which links the Institute today to its origins is that of June 6, 1694, when John Baptist de La Salle and twelve of his followers came together to consecrate themselves for life, to the Christian education of poor boys" (page 2).*
- *"The Brothers need to question themselves continually on how, in practice, they are associated among themselves, so that this association may be a source of nourishment for them, and stimulate their growth as persons, their solidarity with others, and their listening to what God says about the community mission, the educational service of the poor, the reason for their association" (pages 3 - 4).*
- *"The vow of association is not very well understood by some Brothers, nor given much importance; sometimes the community does not have a clear perception of its common mission" (page 35).*
- *"It is necessary to strengthen our identity by attaching more importance to the meaning of the vow of association for the educational service of the poor, at the community, District, and international level, and use this as a basis for clarifying our understanding of the other vows" (page 37).*
- *"The consecration of the Brother should be re-interpreted in terms of its evangelical character, and in the light of the specific vow of 'association for the educational service of the poor'" (page 51).*

We are not inventing the story. We are living it, because we are part of it. Or, rather, the Spirit is leading us and making us live this adventure. Then, as we attempt to tell ourselves what is happening to us, we find an approximate form and words that help us understand the adventure. As happens so many times in the Bible and in the lives of persons everywhere, in successive narrations of the same events we find the words which better reveal the experience to us, or that help us to discover other facets of the same experience that perhaps we had not noticed in the first narration.

This is what has been happening to us in recent years: we are narrating our new story, giving it new words or rediscovering new strength in the old ones, because we realized something from this perspective that had been half- forgotten.

1.2 Why today? "*This is a time of grace*"

Why is this recovery happening today?

- First of all, because we are part of a Church which itself, during these past 40 years, has recovered the awareness of an identity defined as "communion for mission." Communion and mission are the two axes the identity of the Church is built, but also that of every Christian. John Paul II said in *Vita Consecrata*: "*The Church is essentially a mystery of communion*" (VC 41.2), but a communion which, in the image of the Trinity, exists for a mission. In *Christifideles Laici*, he states: "Communion and mission are profoundly connected with each other, they interpenetrate and mutually imply each other, to the point that *communion represents both the source and the fruit of mission: communion gives rise to mission and mission is accomplished in communion*" (Ch L 32; VC).

Religious Life, which is always a prophecy and a sign of the essence of the Church, is rediscovering itself from that perspective. For us "*Brothers of the Christian Schools*" who are marked by the two Church axes even in our institutional name, this post-Council reflection of the Church has been a gift for us along with its corresponding vocabulary, because it allows us to give the appropriate words to the story of our original experience, to the source of our identity as Brothers of the Christian Schools. We are "a ministerial fraternity for Christian education," which is a way of saying that our purpose is to incarnate prophetically *communion for mission*, based on the Lasallian charism and in a specific area, namely, the education of the poor.

- Secondly, because, to the extent that the laity share our charism and become part of our Lasallian story, we see ourselves as obligated to "explain to them" about what this charism is (before it was enough just to live it), but also we have had to say to ourselves, so that later we can say to them, who we Brother are, what is our identity, and what we can offer to them that is specifically our own. The term "associates," used to refer to lay people who share very directly in the charism of a Congregation, is today a commonly used term in the Church. Nevertheless, for us it has other historic and charismatic echoes that accentuate its meaning in terms of solidarity, belonging, being available for the mission...and these echoes made us aware that "being associated" defined us, the Brothers, but to what extent?

- This entire movement that came from the outside in, in addition has found in inner movement, with half a century of existence, in terms of Lasallian studies, the rediscovery of our origins, a better understanding of the writings and the life journey of the Founder.

QUESTIONS:

- From the time of your initial formation until today, what is your personal experience as regards recovering the awareness of "association for the educational service of the poor" as a fundamental dimension of your identity as a Brother?
- In Section 1.1, there were several quotations from Chapter texts. What do these statements suggest for you?

2. A LOOK AT THE ORIGINS

2.1 Our history begins with an enterprise of fraternity.

Around 1684 that group of teachers who gathered around John Baptist de La Salle decided to put into practice an enterprise of fraternity: brothers among themselves, brothers towards their disciples.

One of the most expressive signs and, at the same time, one of the simplest, for getting to know about their enterprise was the name that they chose: *Brothers of the Christian Schools*. Why did they decide to call themselves "*Brothers?*" The reason has nothing to do with the fact that they were not priests, as has so often been believed. The real reason is twofold:

- it indicates, in the first place, the type of relationship that they wanted to create among themselves; it is an enterprise of fraternity, an enterprise of communion among equals, that had as a model the picture that Saint Luke painted for us in the Acts of the Apostles about the way of life of the first Christians: "*They were of one heart and one mind...they held all in common...*"
- at the same time, it also indicates the way in which they wished to be perceived and appreciated by the students, the type of educational relationship between teachers and disciples. The enterprise of fraternity is inseparable from the enterprise of the school where education takes place according to the Spirit of Jesus Christ. In building a fraternal school teachers carry out their primary contribution with their very persons, with their closeness to children and young people, and with their fraternal style of relationships among them.

We must specify, then, that we are speaking about an enterprise of *ministerial fraternity*: a fraternity lived for the mission and shaped by the mission.

2.2 The enterprise is converted into Consecration.

We already know that that enterprise entered into a crisis phase around 1690. A crisis that was at the point of destroying the enterprise along with its founder. How was the crisis resolved? It was resolved by elevating the enterprise to the category of consecration.

The consecration which De La Salle and the twelve Brothers made in 1694 expressly attributes this enterprise of fraternity for the education of the poor to God. Each one, by his act of consecration, affirms that the enterprise is God's work:

- he commits himself to the enterprise to procure the glory of God in that way, because he trusts that He will continue to be present in the work and that He is interested in it;
- therefore, he unites himself to the Society with his Brothers, in solidarity with them to carry out the work;
- because he feels himself responsible for the beneficiaries of the enterprise,

abandoned children and young people, subordinating his own personal fulfillment to his duties within the enterprise on the part of the Society.

2.3 The Brother's consecration: a covenant with three beneficiaries.

The Brother's consecration is a covenant with three beneficiaries: God, his Brothers, and the poor children and young people towards whom the work is aimed. But we also note well that the knot made from the three ties is given within the framework of the society (fraternity) made up in that way. We can observe this clearly in the formula of consecration in 1694 which was used until 1725:

- The nucleus of the formula is very simple and very substantial: *communion for mission* – but in very concrete terms: communion with these persons (and with those who may associate themselves in the future), for this specific mission for which they feel responsible.
- The object of consecration is expressed on two levels: "*to procure the glory of God*" and to build up the community/fraternity which has as its end the education of the poor. Consecration unifies both of these ends or rather, it makes them equivalent. It is the highest expression of the unity in the life of the Brother.
- Commitment consists in "*uniting myself and remaining in the Society with the Brothers...*," and this later breaks down into the three vows: *association, stability, and obedience*. Each of them reinforces one aspect of communion for mission. Note that the three vows, aimed at God, have as their direct beneficiaries the Brothers with whom they are associated, that is to say, the community and not the apostolate, although the latter is the purpose of the former. Fulfilling the vows is done, then, through the Brothers with whom association is constituted.

2.4 The result: a ministerial fraternity.

The immediate result of Lasallian consecration is a fraternity in which its members are fully available to build community and to implement its purpose, not only in the local environment but also universally. In a certain sense, consecration breaks the limitations of the community in space and time.

In the 1694 formula of vows the evangelical counsels, which provide the basis for the three classic vows of religious consecration, are not mentioned. They are, nevertheless, implicit in the radical availability that the person offers as a basic attitude of consecration. But, why this absence? What our first Lasallian community, led by its Founder, sensed as the central nucleus of its consecrated life was *communion for mission* (which, by the way, is the central nucleus of the Gospels, as well as of the identity of the Church). The accent was not placed on the search for evangelical perfection but on the *ministerial fraternity for the education of the poor*. They were convinced that they contributed to the glory of God to the extent that they dedicated themselves to building up this type of fraternity, about which they had no reservation in identifying it as God's work. Fraternity was the existential sign that they were living intensely, and it was that fraternity that became the official sign in their formula of consecration.

In the course of the 25 years between 1694 and his own death, the Founder did not change the formula of vows. Only later, when the Brothers were looking for Church recognition of their religious life, did they submit the expression of their consecration (the

formula of vows) to canonical formality, thereby stripping it of its originality. In that way, a great opportunity to enrich religious life with a new approach was lost. True, the new religious identity had already been introduced into the Church, since it was a work of the Holy Spirit, but its originality had not been grasped. There remained, then, a latent risk for these new "religious" who were assimilated into the traditional plan of religious life: that if, in fact, they were living a type of ministerial religious life in accord with their charism, but they were not able to express their experience in proper terms, but they were using terms that had been borrowed from alien categories.

2.5 Life springs forth from the heart.

The Lasallian story came into existence based on a nucleus or motivation that remains unchanged: to respond to the educational needs of poor children and young people. But the plot in which the argument is developed, giving life and interest to the story and uniting various persons and events involved in the story, is that which is expressed by the vow of association. This is the heart from which springs forth the life of the Lasallian story.

Among the chapters of our story there is one that has special force to help us recover that plot. It is the letter of 1714, from the Brothers in Paris to John Baptist de La Salle. We know the circumstances, the terrible depression that the Founder was suffering, and how he has abandoned the general administration of the Institute. The Brother Directors in Paris and the surrounding areas, feeling that they represented the "Body of the Society," wrote a letter to John Baptist, dated April 1st of that year, which was Easter Sunday. Its ultimate objective was to ask and even to order the Founder to return and to take up again the administration of the Institute. But they were not satisfied with that alone; this was not just a question of obedience. What they did was to put into practice the vow of association:

- First of all, they had to recover this member of the Society for the history of salvation, since this perspective had been obscured in the person of John Baptist de La Salle; therefore, they remind him how God had acted through his person, and how he had been the effective instrument to give the Church this new "*Company*" which was so useful for the Church.
- They make him feel their solidarity: they show him their recognition, their affection, the ties of mutual dependence that had been getting stronger in the Society's own life journey and which were still alive, and for that reason they invite him to recover them.
- In addition, they make him see that it is one spirit that unites them, one and the same charism; they tell him this as they use the same expressions with which the Founder had communicated that spirit to them: "*concerned about the greater glory of God...*"

In this chapter on our origins, we find expressed the profound experience that sustains the vow of association:

*a fraternity that lives the same history of salvation
based on the same spirit for the same mission.*

QUESTIONS:

- What questions, what challenges, what clues do we discover in the origins of Lasallian history for the present time in which we live?

3. THE VOW OF ASSOCIATION, EXPRESSION OF THE BROTHER'S CONSECRATION, the heart of his identity, the expression of the Institute's charism and finality.

With the perspective that we have today of our beginning and of the thinking of the Founder, with the light that comes to us from the current reflection within the Church on its own mystery and on the meaning of Religious Life, we can say that the vow of association made by De La Salle and the Brothers in 1694 and in years following, represented the Brother's identity, as well as the charism and the finality of the Institute. One vow, spelled out in three facets: association, stability, obedience.

3.1 The expression of unity in the Brother's life.

The vow of association meant for the Brother (and will have to mean again) the unity of his consecrated life: the covenant with God, with his Brothers, with his disciples, that was his consecration; each one of these bonds made reference to the other two. The Founder recalled this many times:

- *"Do not distinguish between the duties of your state and what pertains to your salvation and perfection"* (Collection of Various Short Treatises, page 78: 4).
- *"For this had to be the kind of ardent zeal you had for the salvation of those you have to instruct, when you were led to sacrifice yourself..."* (Meditation 201.3).
- *"Because in your state of life you are called to procure the sanctification of your pupils, you should be holy yourself in no ordinary degree, for you must communicate this holiness to them..."* (Meditation 39.2).

That unity of life, that close relationship between personal sanctification and that of the disciples, seems well beyond that theory which has influenced religious life to a great extent, from the two finalities, personal sanctification and the apostolate, where personal sanctification carries the priority. Not a few Brothers have lived with the uneasiness of if the primary concern in their person was that of being a religious or being a teacher. The Brother's consecration has nothing to do with that duality.

3.2 Expression of complementarity among the Brothers.

The vow of association is the Lasallian way of expressing communion. Communion is living in unity, in complementarity, a very different thing from uniformity. Given that the finality of this association corresponds, not to any one person in particular, but to the body of the society, each one accepts to carry out the role entrusted to him, in complementarity with other Brothers, knowing that "In fulfilling their ministry, whatever their individual assignment may be, they are contributing, as a community, to the unique mission of the Institute within the Church" (Rule 16).

The vow of association reminds the Brother that his complementarity with other Brothers does not consist in doing his work in an individualistic way, on the fringes of others, no matter how well it is done, but in a co-responsible way with his Brothers "who are committed to work together so that the Institute will prosper and remain faithful to its mission" (Rule 142).

3.3 Expression of fraternity among the Brothers.

"I promise to unite myself and to remain in society with..." That is the direct object of the promise. Behind these words De La Salle's words from Meditation 39. 3 resound: *"Entreat the God of hearts to keep your heart and those of your Brothers one in the heart of Jesus."* This is the dream of Jesus, what he asks of the Father as a special grace for his disciples, a heritage that he wants to leave them; this is what he asks of his disciples as the sign by which they will be recognized as such.

"The consecrated life can certainly be credited with having effectively helped to keep alive in the Church the obligation of fraternity as a form of witness to the Trinity" (VC 41) but this stands out even more, if that is possible, in the Brothers, who recover in this way the originality of Religious Life, which emerges as a lay fraternity.

But, far from being only an internal bond, consecration by the vow of association is a dynamic of covenant which spreads out in concentric circles from the interior of the community of the Brothers, and associates them with all those who are committed to the educational service of the poor based on the Lasallian charism.

3.4 Expression of the mission that motivates the Brother's consecration.

This is not about a simple "apostolic activity," but about the finality, the central reason why he has consecrated himself, which is to respond to the needs of the young who are poor and who are far from salvation. The vow of association reminds us that the community does not exist for itself, but that it exists for a mission. Here also, the current Church reflection on Religious Life can help us recover without fear what our first Brothers expressed without too much theological reasoning, but moved by the charism: that the mission is an essential part of consecrated life (cf. VC 71). The preferred beneficiaries of our ministry are indicated clearly in the vow: the poor.

Consecration and commissioning (or mission) are two sides of the same life or identity, as is revealed to us in that passage from Isaiah which Jesus makes his own before the Synagogue in Nazareth, and in which he leaves no doubt as to who are the preferred beneficiaries of his ministry: *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor..."* (Isaiah 61: 1-2; Luke 4: 18-19).

3.5 Expression of the Brother's ministry.

Ministry, in its fullest sense, is not identified with the role or the task that someone fulfills, and which must be limited to one part of life. It is not reduced, then, in our case, to the task of education. "Ministry" refers to one's entire identity, taken on by a person and recognized within the Church. The Brother's ministry is equivalent to our whole identity as Brothers in service to the Church, and is given meaning by the vow of association: a community ministry by which, together and by association, we build fraternity for the service the poor by means of education.

Asking the question then, about how we can fulfill the vow of association today, is equivalent to asking how we can realize our ministry today, at the age of 25, 50, 70, or 90.

3.6 A light that clarifies the meaning of the remaining vows.

The meaning that the other vows have in the identity of the Brother should be understood in light of the vow of association. Also, each one of the other vows emphasizes or makes explicit an aspect that is implicit in the vow of association.

- By the *vow of chastity* the Brothers recall and profess that, by vocation and mission, they are called to be experts in and promoters of communion. Their consecrated celibacy should be the sign of a superabundance of gratitude and of love that increases their ministerial fraternity and calls other persons to live communion for mission (cf. VC 46 and 105).

- By the *vow of poverty* the Brothers make themselves more available to build fraternity and develop the ministry to which they have been called. Rather than a lack of external things, the Brothers experience and recognize their own personal poverty, weakness, and limitations. It is that poverty which opens them to others and makes them live in need of others. Furthermore, both personally and in community, they nurture the experience of being a gift for others, and of making good use of gifts received as gifts for the mission.

- By the *vow of obedience* the Brothers contribute the sign and, sometimes, the proof of communion for mission. Obedience strengthens and makes possible the bond of association that unites the Brothers among themselves, communities with the District, Districts with the body of the Institute, in order to accomplish effectively the common project over the personal project, and to subordinate their own interests to the carrying out of the community mission.

- By the *vow of stability* the Brothers express their will to be faithful to specific persons with whom they have bound themselves in their consecration: faithful to God, in whose fidelity they trust and to whom they attribute the work of their hands; faithful to their Brothers, with whom they are in solidarity to accomplish the work; faithful to the beneficiaries of the work, poor children and young people, for whose salvation they feel themselves responsible.

QUESTIONS:

- How is my experience reflected in my consecration as a Brother in the expressions that have been pointed out based on the vow of association? What aspects do I want to highlight? What aspects do I see that are less reflected in the reality of our life?

- How can we accomplish, or how are we fulfilling Recommendation 15 from the 43rd General Chapter?:

"That each Personal Annual Plan (Rule 58b) and the Community Annual Plan (Rule 58a) make use of Chapter Documents to deepen our fidelity to the vow of Association, thereby strengthening our identity as consecrated men, living in community for a mission of educational service to the poor. Likewise, on the occasion of the preparation of the Community Annual Plan, there should be a ceremony in which each community member renews the vow of association, naming the other members of the community."

- In the reality that our community is living, how can we make more concrete the following suggestions from the 43rd General Chapter?

"The Brothers welcome sharing with Partners, and particularly with those who desire to live according to the Lasallian charism, the contribution of their respective identities. They see in this a sign of spiritual and apostolic fecundity.

For this purpose they contribute in a creative and dynamic way to the setting up, and the development of different structures of association, assuming the role of alert and, if necessary, critical judges.

The specific character of their contribution is based on:

- the total gift of their life,*
- the witness of their community life,*
- the experience of God as absolute"*

(43rd General Chapter, Circular 447, pages 9-10)