

WALKING AND BELIEVING TOGETHER IN UNITY IN ORDER TO HISTORICIZE THE KINGDOM

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In the Church structure of tomorrow what will be needed will be to have some places where humankind can rebuild, find again the meaning of things and of themselves, lucidly critique their own alienation, express themselves freely, communicate with others and experience the power of love.

Yves Congar

SUMMARY

The objective of this article is to provide some lines of action in order to understand Lasallian association, from the point of view of the laity, as an expression of dignity, vocation and the responsibility of the baptized, in communion with those who are consecrated. The author leaves the responsibility for re-reading their consecration in the hands of the Brothers, in light of the vow of association for the educational service of the poor based on various interdisciplinary perspectives.

Key Words: association, foundational reality, Church-People of God, ecclesiology of communion.

ASSOCIATED FOR THE EDUCATIONAL SERVICE OF THE POOR: A CHURCH EVENT AND FOUNDATIONAL REALITY. BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION.

As the 44th General Chapter of the Brothers of the Christian Schools recognized, the last 40 years have been lived as an "Exodus," caused by General Chapters and, at the same time, by post-conciliar Church renewal. That Exodus "driving force," in the context of the Institute, generated by a return to the sources, to founding roots, to foundational and living tradition, cannot be understood if it is disconnected from the "Church Pentecost" produced by the movement of theological, liturgical and biblical renewal which concluded with Vatican Council II. It is in the convergence of these two aspects where the foundational and founding sense of Lasallian association for the educational service of the poor can be rediscovered. Faithful to the foundational roots, to the identity of the Brothers of the Christian Schools and to the renewal produced by an understanding of the Church as the People of God and a community of communities, this is what is pertinent to the recovery of the value of association as a Church-foundational event.

On the Church level, the Council, in its Constitution on the Church in the modern world, "Lumen Gentium" Chapter 2, has recovered and reassessed the category of People of God and Communion along with it, to understand the mystery of the Church. It is this "ecclesiastical turn" that has facilitated recognizing and understanding the Church first of all, as "Protagonist of the mystery of God (...) aimed towards history and human experience, constituting it as an historical subject" (Bueno, 1998, page 27); secondly, as " (...) a principle to express its self-awareness (...) its intimate relationship with the God who is revealed to humankind where it has been sent" (Bueno, 1998, page

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28). In face of a "logic of hierarchical ecclesiology," to use a term from Yves Congar, where the Church is perceived as an historical self-sufficient institution (*societas perfecta*) under which the faithful are found (*societas inaequalis*), the Second Vatican Council recovered the deaconal-communal perspective of the early Church, which is characterized by the primacy of a total ecclesiology where unity come before distinction, and the variety of ministries is based on pneumatological and sacramental richness. In this perspective, Bruno Forte states: "(...) the unity of the Church is illumined in the Catholic variety of functions, particular Churches, traditions, cultures" (Forte, 1997, page 4). It is in this sense of a total ecclesiology where the value of the universal priesthood is re-discovered (LG 10), based on the responsibility and the dignity of all the baptized: "The baptized, no matter the charism received or ministry exercised, is above all the *Homo christianus*, who by means of Baptism has been incorporated into Christ, anointed by the Spirit and made the People of God" (Forte, 1997, pages 41 - 41). From this church perspective, association is understood as a ministerial-charismatic-mystical-pneumatological event, since it is rooted in God's selection, by his grace; in the freeing and humanizing action of the Spirit (God operating and transforming today); in the responsibility and dignity of the baptized who, through their charisms and services, support and build up the believing community.

On the Institute level of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, returning to the founding roots, it is thought that the vow of association for the educational service of the poor is the fundamental path to discover their identity as consecrated men; but at the same time, it is the way to re-interpret and understand again the current educational mission as the true salvific-humanizing event (44th General Chapter, number 3, page 24). Brother Álvaro Rodríguez, in his 2003 Pastoral Letter *Associated With the God of the Poor: Our Consecrated Life in Light of the 4th Vow*, again takes up "foundational Lasallian events and texts," such as the Heroic Vow of 1691:

Most Holy Trinity...we consecrate ourselves to You to procure the establishment of the Society of the Christian Schools by all means, in the way that seems to us most pleasing to you for said Society...we vow association and union to procure and maintain said establishment without giving up even if we three are the only ones remaining in said Society and even if we were obliged to beg for alms and to live on bread alone...

The public and perpetual vow of 12 Brothers in 1694:

MOST HOLY TRINITY, Father, Son and Holy Spirt: Prostrate with the most profound respect before your infinite and adorable Majesty, I CONSECRATE MYSELF ENTIRELY TO YOU TO PROCURE YOUR GLORY, as far as I shall be able and as you will require of me. FOR THIS PURPOSE I, John Baptist de La Salle, priest, promise and vow TO UNITE MYSELF AND TO REMAIN IN THE SOCIETY WITH THE BROTHERS (the twelve names are said) IN ORDER KEEP THE GRATUITOUS SCHOOLS, TOGETHER AND BY ASSOCIATION, to go wherever I may be sent, even if I were obliged to beg alms and to live on bread alone; to fulfill in the said Society what has been entrusted to me, whether by the Body of the Society or by its superiors. THEREFORE, I PROMISE AND VOW obedience, both to the Body of said Society as well as to its superiors; these vows, that of association, stability in the Society and that of obedience I promise to keep faithfully all my life. IN FAITH I HAVE SIGNED at Vaugirard on the 6th of June, the Feast of the Most Holy Trinity in the year 1694. Signed: De La Salle.

The Memoir on the Habit of 1689:

This community is ordinarily called the community of the Christian Schools; it is currently founded and established on nothing more than Providence...In this community (its members) are dedicated to running gratuitous schools...

This reference recognizes the gratuitous nature of the schools, the saving mission of education, the situation of the abandonment of children of artisans and the poor, and it gives rise to the origin of the vow of association for the educational service of children and young people, preferentially the poor. Brother Álvaro considers that it was a fact that the fourth vow "(...)" was the first vow of the Founder and the first Brothers and for them it represented the expression of the charism and the finality of the Institute" (Associated with the God of the Poor. 2003 Pastoral Letter, page 9). Association, therefore, is not an accidental, complementary or interim task in the religious consecration of the Brother of the Christian Schools, it is the "sign of identity-fidelity for the ultimate reason for being of consecration," it is "the eschatological-prophetic sign that opens history more and in a better way." As Brother Michel Sauvage states:

The vow of 1691 opens this experience to a future yet to be played out. The vow expresses a precise project but not one that is petrified. It is not fixed on some determined obligations that are just to be observed; it expresses fidelity as a search that must be followed rather than as a patrimony to be conserved. All the more reason that the substance of this vow carries no prohibition, but it is constituted of a concrete will of inventing the good, discerning it as a community (Lasalliana, 1997, number 49, page 7).

But this "foundational reality" is not simply the "property of the Brothers and of the Institute." As was said above, the framework of understanding association is best seen from an ecclesiology that includes the People of God, communion of the universal priesthood; therefore, to live association is also an expression of a way of living, being, thinking, acting in and from *Ekklesia*. Based on the particular way that this "spirituality of association" is lived, from the point of view of consecrated and lay, the Institute is aware of the need of living the vow of association co-responsibly with lay persons, considered as Church main players, with Baptismal dignity, with an ecclesial-diaconal, original and irreplaceable responsibility. In this context the Brothers, as the 44th General Chapter states, are called to live fraternity in a communal and diaconal experience, in the educational mission, along with lay persons: "To live fraternity as a sign. To be mediators for them and with them in the educational vocation. To be for them and with them the memory and the guarantors of the Lasallian charism. To propose new structures of communion for the mission (44th General Chapter, number 3, page 4). "The Brothers offer themselves to the Lasallian Family as guides for communion and spirituality **in order to give an evangelical foundation to the educational mission**" (44th General Chapter, number 3, page 25). The Brothers therefore embody a memorial, testimonial dimension (they are witnesses and testimony) within the Lasallian Family of the love of God that causes and convokes communion and the mission of attending to the "non-existent in history," to the "new children of artisans and the poor."

Association is, therefore, a vital expression of the foundational essence of the Church as People of God and communion but, at the same time, as the foundational reality and principle of identity for the being and work of the Brothers. In the correlation of these two aspects, this article will attempt to present, in light of a People of God-Communion ecclesiological base and a Lasallian horizon, rooted in "Foundational Lasallian texts and events," some implications for the understanding of Lasallian association. To that end, the thinking of Bruno Forte has been used as a theoretical reference, in his text "The Church icon of the Trinity," and the reflections of Brother Michel Sauvage in his conference to the General Assembly on Lasallian Association entitled *For a Better Understanding of Lasallian Association* (November 1998). It is important to underscore that this

text does not attempt a re-reading of the vows in light of the vow of Association for the educational service of the poor. This is a fundamental task needs to be realized by the Brothers based in interdisciplinary, multi-cultural and pluri-religious perspectives. The objective of this text is to launch some possible courses of action for the understanding of Lasallian association, from a lay perspective, as an expression of the dignity, vocation and responsibility of baptized persons, in communion with consecrated religious.

1. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNDERSTANDING OF LASALLIAN ASSOCIATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A PEOPLE OF GOD-COMMUNION ECCLESIOLOGY

- The People of God should be considered in their Trinitarian dimension; in the words of Saint Cyprian, the Church consists in unified people who participate in the union of the persons of the Trinity.
- The Church, as the People of God, make evident the community dimension of Christian faith and life. As Bueno de la Fuente says: "The Christian is made in the heart of people. No one can say 'I believe' except in the context of 'We believe'" (Bueno de la Fuente, 1998, page 39).
- The equal status of all Christians is fundamental and of the first order. Confessions of faith and their variety, in accord with their states, ministries, charisms, should take place within the People of God and in service of its mission.
- The Church-People of God is inserted in history in the journeying of all People. In this perspective, the ecclesial community cannot be considered as outside of or foreign to the concerns or dimensions of the collective existence of all people.
- As an eschatological community, among *adventum* and *novum*, as a pilgrim Church on a historical exodus, it is free of all triumphalist temptations, constituting herself as a humble servant who serves to narrate the gratuitous love of God, and grace received. The Church came into being by God's free initiative and not simply from the values of a human population or group.
- The Church is and exists on the basis of the assembly (*congregatio*), chosen, convoked by God (*convocatio*). In it, the common celebration is what makes possible the fulfillment of its own mission overall in history and in human existence.
- The new community exists in the scope of open reconciliation by the totality of Jesus' life and by the action and work of the Spirit. The community is one area of humankind in keeping with and inserted in a new experience of reconciliation.
- The understanding of Church-People of God brings with it ecumenical implications: solidarity with the dramas and hopes of human beings beyond questions of religion, politics, cultures. In the face of other Christian confessions it makes present a point of unity and encounter which is prior to any other difference. All human being are invited to be the People of God.
- The choice of God on the part of an individual is lived out in a concentration-expansion dialectic. It is concentrated on an individual or group in order to use God's grace for the multitude, the totality. "In the background of a divided humanity, the call of Abraham points to the blessing of all peoples" (Bueno de la Fuente, 1998, page 31).

- The call of God is accepted in the vocation-sending-sender dialectic. The mission is what determines the character of the vocation. God, choosing and unifying human beings as a people, establishes with those people a covenant with the mission to serve reconciliation and reunification of all peoples. Said covenant is animated by openness: "The reading that the people make of history cannot be reduced to the history itself of a people, but the collective memory is linked to it and the covenant of Abraham and Noah, who were not Jews, and to the original unity of the human race" (Bueno de la Fuente, 1998, page 31).
- From a People of God ecclesiological perspective, the charismatic dimension of all people convoked and gathered by God is underscored, in God and for the service of the human and Christian community. The richness and variety of gifts is experienced with a view to common use. All participate in different forms and services, prophecy, and the royal priesthood of Christ.
- In this perspective the charismatic dimension is linked to the ministerial dimension of Church-People. Its ministerial dimension is not exhausted in the ordained minister (consecrated). In terms of ministers of Unity, religious appeal to other members of the body, to the variety of gifts and services awakened by the Spirit.
- In the Church-People of God, ordained ministry (consecrated) is understood as a ministry of synthesis and not as a synthesis of ministries. Ministry is a service of discernment, animation of charisms and services with a view to the communion and the to the growth of the Church. The Brothers, being ministers of Jesus Christ, understand the charism as a state of service to the cause of the same Jesus Christ. The Church is, then, completely ministerial, it is a Church completely filled with the action of the Spirit and always in a state of service. The communion-ministries relationship makes evident, in this perspective, the common grace of all. Said relationship among ecclesial ministries is understood as complementarity in diversity, mutual service in an uncompromising difference of the states of life.
- From the perspective of an ecclesiology of communion the Spirit is perceived as acting over the entire community, giving rise to charisms that are configured as ministries in service of the growth of the community. The Church is roused and renewed by the fidelity of the Spirit.
- A Church-People of God institution recognizes in all the baptized, in an explicit and singular way, the responsibility of being Church and of expressing in its very existence a dimension of service to which the ecclesial community is called. In the Church there should co-exist and pre-exist ministries in which the gift and commitment of each baptized person is carried out. Therefore, it is important that each baptized person become aware of his or her consecration and mission, in virtue of the baptism and work of the Spirit. It is important, then, that association be understood again from the co-relationship between the action of the Spirit, baptismal commitment, vocation and the lay state, communion-participation, charisms, services.
- From the People of God ecclesiology it is fundamental to understand meeting one another (lay persons and religious) in a communion articulated in that each one is called to make his or her own original and irreplaceable contribution. This is the path that opens to a total ecclesiology, not a hierarchical one, a path of a new maturity for the baptized, discerning each person according to his or her own charism that will be placed in service of all of God's people. A crossroad. A place of critical convergence, co-responsibility, prophecy about the mission projects of the laity and the consecrated, of one's being, of life itself. In this context, dignity and autonomy proper to each baptized person are recognized and the specific responsibility of lay persons.

- The People of God is a priestly people, recognizing the original and proper work of the Spirit in each of the baptized, the enriching, not mutilating, unity of diversity. Associated for the educational-evangelizing mission (historicizing the Kingdom) in the spirit-practice of Jesus Christ and his configuring cause (Paschal spirituality). In association, then, there is a relationship between *sensus* and *consensus fidelium*.
- The value of the laity is appreciated from the Church-People of God perspective: it is derived from the ordination to service and the mission that is inserted in the anthropology of grace (Forte, page 56). Each is called to be present, to participate, to take part, in accord with the historical situation, exercising the critical prophetic role that causes confrontation between the Word of God and the presence of its history.

2. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNDERSTANDING OF LASALLIAN ASSOCIATION FROM TEXTS AND LASALLIAN FOUNDATIONAL EVENTS.

- For Brother Álvaro Rodríguez, the fourth vow continues to be current, since it is thanks to this vow that there is an openness to the world's new dimensions and realities, permitting a decentralization that leads to an *aggiornamento* of the needs of poor youth and children. It is a call to creativity, to new initiatives in favor of them, since the Brothers have associated themselves for said mission – an ecclesial option for the "not recognized, not named" in history. (Associated with the God of the Poor – Our Consecrated Life in Light of the 4th Vow. Pastoral Letter to the Brothers, 2003, page 6).
- In this perspective, he highlights that the vow of association for the educational service of the poor was the first vow for the Founder and the first Brothers. For them this vow represented the expression of the charism and the finality of the Institute. The Brothers consecrate themselves to God, associated in community, for the educational service of the poor and, starting from them, of all young people. Association is, then, a sign of the Catholic and apostolic sense of the Institute's mission, lived in the option for the poor, as a God-enlightened option, the mediation of the revelation of God in history. Consecration and mission revolve around association (Associated with the God of the Poor, Our Consecrated Life in Light of the 4th Vow. Pastoral Letter to the Brothers, 2003, page 9). This thinking brings with it the thought that the community is and ought to be for the Brothers the first place of the experience of association; to think, feel, live and experience life as a consecrated man from the point of view of collegiality, sustained in filiation and fraternity in order to live together consecration as an impoverishment in solidarity in and for the educational mission.
- The community, then, does not live or exist or even think of itself except in relation to the mission. Community association will have value and meaning insofar as communities continue to be a response to the reality, needs and experience of young people, especially the poor. These communities will be close-knit, in solidarity with others, active and creative. Along these same lines "(...) the community is the place of discernment that will permit the configuring of a collective identity in apostolic service (Associated with the God of the Poor, Our Consecrated Life in Light of the 4th Vow. Pastoral Letter to the Brothers, 2003, page 9).
- For Brother Álvaro, association is recognized as something current, due to an ecclesiology of communion and the rediscovery of the role of the laity, to a new awareness of the potential of the charism and to the decrease in vocations and to aging that make difficult the sustaining of works. Although the movement has taken shape due to the last criterion, this is not the most fundamental one. (Associated with the God of the Poor, Our Consecrated Life in Light of the 4th

Vow. Pastoral Letter to the Brothers, 2003, page 10). It is not about the fact that religious share a charism that belongs to them and currently may be suffering due to strategic and utilitarian interests, an adaptation to a new reality and lay condition, but "(...) the charism precedes its incarnation in the religious or lay sphere" (Associated with the God of the Poor, Our Consecrated Life in Light of the 4th Vow. Pastoral Letter to the Brothers, 2003, page 10). In the words of Brother Álvaro:

Brothers, I am convinced that our vow of Association for the educational service of the poor is our particular way of building the Kingdom and of working in the Work that God has entrusted to us, starting from our own poverty, with clear awareness of our own limits and inconsistencies, as workers and prophets of a better world. Jon Sobrino said that we Christians today can intuit that the future of faith has to do with the closeness or distance of the poor. And I ask myself: Would that also not have something to do with the future of our Institute? (Associated with the God of the Poor, Our Consecrated Life in Light of the 4th Vow. Pastoral Letter to the Brothers, 2003, page 18).

- For Michel Sauvage, according the formula of vows, the commitment of association is a vow of a project, of a finality, of a reason for being. A vow of association is made to keep gratuitous schools. (To understand better Lasallian association, a conference given to Directors of Lasallian Centers of France, General Assembly of the A.L.S., 1998, page 12). In this perspective, what motivated the action of the Founder and his co-brothers, what made them determined to establish, maintain and defend their association, was the will to truly foster the gratuity of schools. (To understand better Lasallian association, a conference given to Directors of Lasallian Centers of France, General Assembly of the A.L.S., 1998, page 12).
- Association also is the framework for educational relationships in that they are made more personalized. In school, the learning of knowledge is linked to the ability to be. The Brother is concerned about knowing each student individually as a person. Children and young people are not just those who use the school, they are people with rights and duties, with dignity. The Brothers, fulfilling a determined task, establish a group of young people, a fraternal community – a formative one – vital, and the personal relationship continues with each of them. In this way, the Brothers are associated together to keep schools; an association of shepherds who are fundamentally concerned about being for children and young people, ministers of Jesus Christ, in charge of proclaiming the Good News of the Gospel to them. (To understand better Lasallian association, a conference given to Directors of Lasallian Centers of France, General Assembly of the A.L.S., 1998, page 13).
- Among the reasons for beginning the community of teachers, driven by the Founder, one finds his awareness of the risks that independence implies, anarchy, for the success of the schools. As he gathered them together, John Baptist de La Salle tries to place his procedures in synchrony, his outlook, his educational and pedagogical objectives. This convergence of finalities, behaviors and efforts and the continuity that will favor the school progress of children and the young, it will facilitate the school being a place of salvation that is run well. At the same time, this convergence will promote the functioning of association on the Institute level, in the measure that the pedagogical practices of the Brothers are characterized by common traits. There exists, then, unity and pedagogical cooperation that consists in a certain consensus that facilitates the training of students and the communion of teachers and educational projects. Those who come to the School are initiated in a certain pedagogical styles and forms, without denying creativity and innovation. (To understand better Lasallian association, a conference given to Directors of Lasallian Centers of France, General Assembly of the A.L.S., 1998, page 14).

- Association is not simply a human work with tools and functions in order to merely conform to a kind of grouping with a business purpose in mind. It takes strength in its having a mystical dimension that nourishes and energizes it. A community, made up of men and animated by a total consecration to God, gives strength to association in order to keep schools. The awareness of a vocation, of a call from God, with the Brothers, of a religious profession that integrates the apostolic reality even in its consecration to a common educational work. A mystical dimension that is nourished by common practices: prayer, formation, spiritual reading, sharing the Word. This mystical dimension is united to a filial-fraternal dimension, a spirit that animates the community life and that translates into a specific style of educational relationships. (To understand better Lasallian association, a conference given to Directors of Lasallian Centers of France, General Assembly of the A.L.S., 1998, page 17).

During the first assembly held in 1686, De La Salle's companions had taken a certain number of measures that revealed the nascent awareness of their collective identity. One of these decisions concerned the change of the name of the community. They decided to substitute the name of *Teachers of the Christian Schools* with *Brothers of the Christian Schools*. They understood perfectly that this name change had a double meaning: in terms of community life in imitation of the first Christians, in terms of the style of the educational relationship. (To understand better Lasallian association, a conference given to Directors of Lasallian Centers of France, General Assembly of the A.L.S., 1998, page 18).

- The essential thing is that each Brother not be thought of in isolation. It is, first and foremost, the dynamic community overall in which each consecrated member is inserted. The way of being Brother (Institute), the reason for being, that is what is at the root of association. Association was born out of the will to respond to an urgent need of children and young people far from salvation. This awareness has been maintained at different points of crisis in the Institute. What is essential for association is this identity-foundational aspect; it is the relationship between the reason for being-existence and the manner of being. The question about association is linked to the question of schools. Schools demonstrate that they are ecclesial and human structures so that children and young people might have access to human and Christian salvation. For this reason, the Brothers are associated together to keep schools. "Together" is how the Brothers can achieve change and convert the historical situation. (To understand better Lasallian association, a conference given to Directors of Lasallian Centers of France, General Assembly of the A.L.S., 1998, page 19).

3. OPTIONS AND TASKS THAT ASSOCIATION IMPLIES

- There is no believing, journeying and confessing together if there is no place where one can share faith journeys, read the Word together, experience solidarity and mutual support (from and in structures with emotional closeness and political sensitivity).
- Accepting "pro-existence," celebrating, proclaiming the Kingdom of God, supporting and building up the human/Christian community, being committed to a path of conversion. This implies the voluntary recognition of our own limits and renouncing any form of domination, ambition toward sovereignty in order to recognize others and their rights.
- Living the way to be a Church community, convoked by God and gathered by service to human beings, requiring that rules "not impose anything that is not necessary" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*,

number 18). "Unity in what is necessary, liberty in doubt, in all things charity" (John XXIII). Along these lines it is fundamental to distinguish the essential from the peripheral. In the case of association, the peripheral could be thinking about association as an administrative-financial act, handing over schools directed by the Brothers, head positions by lay persons, contractual financial cooperation, transfer of powers, etc.).

- To be associated involves respecting the legitimate customs of each vocation and state (lay and consecrated persons). Unity is protected and promoted when in the Church charity is sufficient to order the respect for legitimate traditions and practices, both for lay and religious. But, at the same time, it involves not giving scandal to others; even in that which is permitted and legitimate one may need to put on the brakes. Charity should be the ultimate criterion for discernment in action. Maintaining unity demands that transcend since there is no particularism that should be respected, but a common patrimony that needs to be valued and promoted.
- Association brings with it the recognition of new practices and making new apprenticeships. Dialoging is a demanding cause since it is an act of participation, of taking part. It supposes that one is willing to put forward his case, get involved in a discussion, be willing to be subject to another's judgement within one's own rank, renouncing the idea of thinking a definitive position with no possibility for evolution.
- Lasallian association is part of the identity of the Brother, his reason for being and acting within the community of believers, within the Institute. It is from this vow that he understands his educational ministry, mission, his life in community, prayer. It is a structuring-foundational vow and, therefore, reflecting on its value is to think about what it means to be a Brother. It cannot be understood simply in a utilitarian and functional order as the changeover to lay persons, occupying positions of power, ignoring singularity and the irreplaceable value of vocations and ecclesial ministries.

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