

ASSOCIATION – THEN AND NOW
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ABSTRACT

This article has considerable documentary value. It is a synthesis of beliefs about the dynamics of Lasallian Association debated in the Institute before the 44th General Chapter of 2007. All the articles in this issue represent an important starting point, as well as expressing clearly the concern to move beyond a simple Lasallian lay membership, where one shares the mission, to look to a horizon of Lasallian belonging where Lasallians are called to live experiences of association for the educational mission.

Key-words: association, society, community, degrees of belonging

I have been asked to address the topic of Association, to consider its importance in the development of the story of the Brothers of the Christian Schools and the Lasallian mission and to suggest some implications for the future.

The earliest dictionary citing in French of the verb *to associate* and the nouns *association* and *associate* occur in the 1690's in the dictionaries of Furetière and of the Academy. We need to recall that it is only towards the end of the 17thC that the French language takes on its definitive form with regard to spelling, the use of accents and so on. Furetière defines **to associate** as *to found a society or to admit someone into it by agreement* and illustrates this by referring to *Confraternities composed of a number of the faithful who have associated themselves to take part in praying for one another*. The Academy dictionary of 1693 directs the reader to the word **society** and defines it as *a company, union of two or more persons who come together for a common interest, for a particular matter, and under certain conditions*.

The 17th C French spirituality was particularly conscious of two citations from the Acts of the Apostles describing the first Christian community:

*(the first converts) devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers (Acts 2:42) and Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and of one soul, and no one claimed ownership of any possessions, but everything they held was in common (Acts 4:32)*¹

The emergence of new-style Christian communities based on these citations from Acts of the Apostles marked them out as quite different from the existing enclosed monastic-style communities

¹ Cf. the Memoir of 1721 to the Parliament of Rouen which describes De La Salle's work in just these terms.

based on the traditional vows of poverty, chastity and obedience... These new groups aimed to serve God by living their faith through service **within** the society in which they lived. The practical implication was that they could not be limited by the prevailing laws prescribing enclosure and cloister as “religious” i.e. with solemn vows. They did, however, see their particular mission as members of what we would now call as an **intentional** community.

The words *society* and *association* are found at the beginning of the 17thC in the works initiated by Monsieur Vincent, Saint Vincent de Paul (1580-1660), whose dedication to the poor of Paris and whose concern for the widespread ignorance of the Christian faith of so many people in country areas led him to become the founder of the Congregation of the Mission (Lazarists/Vincentians), a society of priests living in community but not with monastic vows. The plight of the poor in Paris in the 1630’s was such that one-third of all baptisms were of children left at church or convent doors and it was Vincent’s position in the Gondi family that enabled him to get the leading families at Court involved in his concern for the poor.

In this work for the poor Vincent de Paul had a notable helper, Saint Louise de Marillac (1590-1660), whose work with the nobly-born women of the Court led first to the formation of the group called the *Dames de charité*. The practical difficulties encountered in having their carriages manoeuvre in the narrow streets of Paris led the noble women rely on their servants to succour the poor. After 1633 when these servant women became the first *Filles de charité*, Vincent de Paul was very clear in preventing them from becoming cloistered as ‘religious’ by not allowing them to make the traditional solemn vows of religion. His words are notable:

The purpose of the Daughters of Charity is centred on honouring Jesus Christ, serving him corporally and spiritually in the person of the poor, whether sick or children, whether prisoners or others who, through shame, were afraid of making their needs known... They are to remind themselves that, although they are not nuns, since that state would not be suitable for the work of their vocation, nevertheless, since they are more exposed outside than nuns, usually having only the houses of the sick as their convent, a rented room as their cell, the parish church as their chapel, the city streets or hospital wards as their enclosure, the fear of God as their grille, and holy modesty as their veil, they are obliged, because of this, to lead a life as virtuous as if they were professed in some religious order, and to behave anywhere in the world where they might be with as much recollection, purity of heart and body, detachment from created things, and edification as real nuns in the seclusion proper to their own convent ... The service of the poor is to be preferred to all else and to be performed without delay. If at a time set aside for prayer, medicine or help has to be brought to some poor man, go and do what has to be done with an easy mind, offering it up to God as a prayer... God is not neglected if prayers are put aside ... in order that another such work may be completed... Therefore when you leave prayer to help some poor man, remember this – that the work has been done for God.²

When the *Filles de charité* first served away from Paris, Vincent was no less astute in telling them how to speak to a bishop who was a stranger:

If he asks who you are, and if you are religious, tell him no, by the grace of God that it is not that you do not have high esteem for religious, but if you were like them you would have to be enclosed, and that as a result you would have to say good-bye to the service of the poor. Tell him that you are poor Daughters of Charity and that you are given to God for the service of the poor, and that you are free to retire or to be sent away.

² Letters, especially No.2546

Of particular significance for our topic is that the original group of Dames de charité, unable to serve the poor directly as already mentioned, wished to be called after 1643 the **associates** (les associées) of the Daughters of charity³. This is the earliest reference I have come across which uses the word **associates** in a context similar to that followed by many religious congregations today. Let us now consider two other **societies** that were to have a great influence on the life and work of John Baptist de La Salle - Jean- Jacques Olier's Society of Saint-Sulpice and Nicolas Barré's Sisters of the Child Jesus.

Society of Saint-Sulpice

Jean-Jacques Olier and two companions were determined to contribute to the reform of priestly training but at first had little success. Here is what Olier's biography tells us about the particular circumstances by which Olier and his two companions bound themselves **by law** to continue their project:

In 1641, in the village of Vaugirard, Jean-Jacques Olier and two other priests began community life. Their idea was to work towards the establishment of a seminary in spite of the collapse of a previous attempt... To judge according to the rules of human prudence, this foundation seemed completely unreasonable. It was quite rash to go and attempt such a difficult in a dilapidated village without any temporal support. The three resolved to join together in God's service and form a Society. As the aim they set themselves was to procure the glory of the Most Holy Trinity by means of priests, they decided to take as the model of their society that of the three divine persons, taking divine love as their sole bond without any vow, as Father de Condren had himself recommended to them.

Accordingly, on 21st November (the day on which clergy dedicated themselves to their work for the following year), the three went on a pilgrimage to Montmartre (then outside Paris) and consecrated themselves to the most blessed Trinity with the promise to stay together and work for the instruction and sanctification of the clergy. They did so in a statutory declaration before a notary:

Three priests, finding themselves called in unity of mind to the service of God and the Holy Church, to train for him ministers to serve his greatness worthily, believe that in honour of the divine society of the three Persons, they should unite by a holy promise never to leave one another nor to give up the plan that it has pleased God to show them.

Père Barré's foundations

Père Nicolas Barré (1621-1686), friend and adviser to De La Salle, urged him to give away his personal fortune rather than use it to endow the schools around Rheims. Barré founded a group of Sisters who survive until today, but his little group of 'brothers' (1673) broke up in his lifetime possibly because Barré never lived with them in the same house nor formed community with them as he was a member of the Minim community in Rouen.

³ Elizabeth Rapley in her book **The Dévotes** (McGill-Queen's University Press ISBN 0-7735-1101-6 1993) distinguishes between the *Filles séculières*, *les congrégées* and *les associées*, the first group of whom were the *Dames de charité*.

What is significant for us is some ‘secret advice’ left by Barré in which he pointed out to his Sisters that their sanctification would come through their work with poor girls, not by being enclosed in a cloister.

The French historian Georges Compayré attributes De La Salle’s success in founding schools for poor boys to the ‘mouvement’ (French) he launched. The basic elements of this ‘movement’ were the **association** that led to a **community**, and the choice of the name ‘**brother**’ which, by using the same word to define the relationship between the Brothers and their students, united the bonding within the community to its mission.

When we come to consider the importance of the vow of association in Lasallian history we need to consider the so-called ‘heroic vow’ of 1691 to found the community and then the life vows of association, obedience and stability pronounced by De La Salle and 12 chosen Brothers on 6th June 1694.

The “heroic vow”

Some 50 years after the example of Olier and his companions had bound themselves to found the seminary of Saint-Sulpice, De La Salle and two members of his community, also at Vaugirard, followed the example of Olier and his companions. We turn to 1691 and a time of crisis. Brother Henri L’Heureux, the person designated to succeed De La Salle, had died in mid-year. Eight of the sixteen Brothers in Rheims had left the Institute and only one young man presented himself for the novitiate. Amid this general discouragement among his followers, De La Salle clung to his faith that this new society was indeed “God’s work” and put his faith in the Brothers whom God had given him.

On 21st November 1691, therefore, at Vaugirard, De La Salle with Brothers Nicolas Vuyart and Gabriel Drolin, who had been with De La Salle since 1682, made a vow to found the society even if only one of them was left to do so and if they had to beg for food to stay alive. This ‘heroic vow’ became known only after Drolin’s return from Rome around 1727. The text deserves to be recalled:

Most holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, prostrate in a profound respect before your infinite and adorable majesty, we consecrate ourselves entirely to you, to procure with all our power and with all our care, the establishment of the society of the Christian Schools in the manner that appears to be the most agreeable to you and the most advantage to the said Society. And for this purpose I, John Baptist de La Salle, Priest; I, Nicolas Wiart, and I, Gabriel Drolin, from this moment and for always until the last survivor, or till the establishment of the said Society has been completely achieved, make the vow of Association and Union to bring about and maintain the said establishment without our being able to abandon it, even if we were to remain just we three in the said Society, and that we were obliged to beg alms and live on bread alone. In view of which, we promise to do unanimously and with a common consent, whatever we believe in conscience and without any human consideration to be for the greater good of the said Society. Done this twenty-first of November, the day of the Presentation of the Most Blessed Virgin 1691, in faith of which we have signed.

The vows of 1694

Three years later on June 6th 1694 De La Salle and 12 of his followers made vows of life according to the following formula:

Most holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, prostrate in a most profound respect before your infinite and adorable majesty, I consecrate myself entirely to you to procure your glory as far as I am able and as you will require of me. And for this purpose, I, John Baptist de La Salle, priest, promise and vow to unite myself and remain in society with Brothers Nicolas Vuyart, Gabriel Drolin, Jean Partois, Gabriel-Charles Rasigade, Jean-Henry, Jacques Compain, Jean Jacquot, Jean-Louis de Marcheville, Michel-Barthélemy Jacquinet, Edmonde Leguillon, Giles Pierre et Claude Roussel **to keep together and by association gratuitous schools**, wherever they may be, **even if I should be obliged in order to do so to beg alms and live on bread alone**, or to do in the said society what I shall be given to do, whether by the body of the society or by the superiors who will be in charge of it. Wherefore, I promise and vow **Obedience**, whether to the body or the society or to the superiors, which vows whether of **Association** or of **Stability** in the said society or of Obedience, I promise to keep inviolably all my lifetime. In faith of which I have signed, done at Vaugirard this sixth of June, feast of the Most Holy Trinity, in the year one thousand six hundred and ninety-four.

The vows of 1694 founded the Society in a formal manner: the ‘heroic vow’ of 1691 had now been fulfilled! But De La Salle invited only 12 Brothers whom he had carefully prepared to make these vows of **association, stability** and **obedience** and he formally forbade them to make known, inside or outside the community, what had taken place. Notice that each man wrote his own formula by hand, naming the twelve others with whom he was **associating himself**. From the viewpoint of the Church law of the time, De La Salle was creating a new ‘religious community’ without seeking formal permission!

But it is important to note that all the Brothers at Vaugirard on this day were also associated by their very presence in the community. We need to remind ourselves that some years earlier, the foundation aspects of 1686 – a new name, a new way of dressing- are those of a brotherhood that forms a **lay community** for the express purpose of teaching the poor gratuitously. De La Salle’s foundation stone, therefore, was the formation of **a community** that came together for a specific purpose.⁴

The formal approval of the Brothers’ Rule and way of life as a **religious institute** by the Bull of Approbation of Pope Benedict XIII in 1725 required the Brothers to add the classic vows of poverty, chastity and obedience to those of association (“to keep together and by association gratuitous schools”) and stability, the guarantee of that same association. We may rightly question whether the Roman authorities responsible for granting this approval had really understood the “newness” of what De La Salle and the first Brothers had gradually come to live!

Be that as it may, since the formal renewal “to return to the primitive inspiration” as Vatican II had requested, the Institute, especially through the General Chapters of 1966-7, 1976 and especially in 2000⁵, is committed to re-establishing the concept of **Association** as central to the future of the Lasallian mission of human and Christian education.

In the light of what we have treated so far, let us pause to reflect why association is important for us today.

A contemporary English dictionary offers the following definitions of the key words **associate** (verb and noun) and **association**:

⁴ This is the central conclusion of Michel Sauvage in his monumental *Catéchèse et laïcité*.

⁵ In 44^o General Chapter (2007), the Institute made the centre of its reflexion the association for the service of the poor.

to associate = to join as a companion, partner, or ally;
 to associate = to unite, to combine; to enter into a league or union
 associate = a partner in interest, as in business, an enterprise or action
 association = an organization of people with a common purpose and having a formal structure.

In 1976, the 40th General Chapter of the Brothers officially recognized that the Lasallian mission had long been shared with men and women who were not members of the Institute. The Chapter recognized as well that some of these persons were looking for some way of being more closely linked with the mission of the Institute when it suggested that more reflection be done on what it called **degrees of belonging** to the Institute. [Note **belonging**, not membership!]

The 41st General Chapter of 1986 expressed this close relationship between Brothers and lay persons by using the word **partner** and by speaking of the relationship as **partnership**. Significantly, the official **Shared Mission** document mandated by the 42nd General Chapter in 1993 introduces itself with the words **Dear Fellow Lasallians** and speaks of the **common heritage** shared by all Lasallians.

If we turn to the Brothers' Rule, approved by the Church in 1987 after 20 years of experimentation following the Second Vatican Council, we can read the following statement:

By the vow of association for the service of the poor through education, the Brothers commit themselves, as the Founder did, to conduct schools or other centers of **human and Christian education**⁶ that are accessible to the poor.

At the same time, they strive to develop educational methods that promote above all the social betterment of ordinary classes of people.

The text of the 1987 Rule, discussing Community, speaks **implicitly** of association in No.48:

The distinctive character of the Brothers' community is to be a community of faith where the experience of God is shared.

The Brothers find inspiration in this prayer of Christ "Father, that they may all be one as you and I are one so that the world may believe that you have sent me."

In their relations with one another, the Brothers make every effort to model their community life on the relations of knowledge and love that constitute the life of the Holy Trinity.

Animated by the Spirit, the Brothers build community by the joyful gift of themselves for the service of others.

It is interesting to substitute the word **Lasallians** in place of the word **Brothers** and see what this might mean for the sense of association in Lasallian works!

The 1987 Rule continues in No.49a:

Each Brother considers himself responsible, in union with all the others, for the life of the community, the power of its witness, and for its pastoral commitment.

Could we say that association means (or **could mean** in an ideal situation) that Each Lasallian considers himself/herself responsible, in union with all the others, for the life of the school's

⁶ Conscious of the historical presence of the Institute in many countries that are not Christian led the 1986 Chapter to insist on the importance of both *human* and *Christian* as essential to describe the Lasallian mission.

[work's, group's etc.] adult community, the power of its witness, and for its pastoral commitment to those confided to its care'.

While I think that groups such as Signum Fidei initially ran the risk of offering lay Lasallians a way of life that was too close to their being “mini-Brothers”, I offer this use of the Rule as a **possible direction**, conscious that it may serve as a starting point or as a model as we try to envisage what association might mean in relation to the various **degrees of belonging** that characterize those who serve in the Lasallian mission.

Let me now offer you some symbolic images of **The Three Doors** to stimulate your own creativity in deepening the sense of association.

We can feel very small and insignificant outside of a large door as you see in the presentation for doors conceal and protect what is behind them. The first door which can admit us to the Lasallian Heritage invites us to be the best professional educators we have always aspired to be. When we determine to do this and offer the best educational **service** we can, we cross **a threshold** that links us with like-minded Lasallian educators in some 83 countries of today's world.

Once the door is open and we become more used to our role in a Lasallian work, we realize that many of our Lasallian colleagues are always ready to help us understand **why** and **how** things are done. In Lasallian terms, this is when we experience the spirit of ‘**community**’, **doing things together** with all contributing in a real partnership.

Once we are well inside the door, we find in the Lasallian story that De La Salle and his Brothers have tried to live by **a deep faith in God** and a sense of having been **called** to be ‘brothers [sisters] to one another’ and ‘older brothers and sisters’ to the young.

Faith, service and **community** are three different doors or entry points. It doesn't matter by which door you enter: **from inside**, you see all three aspects as complementary and you have your own special place.

Let me now offer you some questions for further reflection on association:

What does association mean for me as a Brother or as someone involved in a Lasallian work? How might it strengthen my sense of ‘vocation’, that is, of being called?

In what ways do you feel the reality of your association with others in the Lasallian mission has already helped the development of the mission of human and Christian education in your workplace? In your District or Delegation?

Has your District witnessed already a growing interest by a number of people in **various forms of ‘association’**? What do you see as important in the development and extension of such a concept in the immediate future?

Does the 43rd General Chapter's categories of ‘partners’ and ‘associates’ [cf. text that follows] help to further your own understanding of association or is it premature in defining categories that will emerge only gradually as association develops at its own pace in different societies and cultures?

Read the text:

PARTNERS

There are Partners who in fact share our mission in its multiple educational, catechetical, apostolic and professional aspects, and make it possible for the mission to be accomplished. They collaborate with conviction for the time they are with us. We need to reflect on the process they need to follow to become Associates, if they so wish.

ASSOCIATES

There are partners who have a long record of collaborating in the Lasallian Mission, and who feel a call to deepen the charism, spirituality and Lasallian communion in which they wish to participate. In particular, their lives are already marked by a number of distinctively Lasallian characteristics:

- a vocation inspired by the charism of Saint John Baptist de La Salle and his values;
- a life of faith which discovers God in everyday life understood in the light of Scripture and, for persons of other religions, in the light of their own sacred texts
- a community experience of some form or other suited to the identity of its members;
- a mission of some duration which associates persons with the educational service of the poor;
- an openness of mind which makes it possible to see beyond the individual and the immediate environment.

A QUESTION FOR THE BROTHERS

What might your community have to offer to help lay associates feel that they do indeed share the Lasallian mission and have a particular part to play in it now and in the future?

TWO QUESTIONS FOR LAY ASSOCIATES

What would you like to tell the Brothers about your **role** as a Lasallian associate?

What are some things you would like to see developed **now**? And **in the future**?

I do not offer a formal conclusion to this text. The conclusions are those you must draw for yourselves by your careful consideration of the formal questions I have raised as well as any other questions that have occurred to you throughout this presentation.