

## THREE VISIONS OF ASSOCIATION: AFRICA, OCEANIA AND LATIN AMERICA

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### SUMMARY

Three Lasallians, three continents, three visions, a common root? This article tries to present three voices, with different accents, reflecting from the point of view of cultural social and academic preoccupations. Together they help to visualize the commitment of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools to promoting association for the educational service of the poor in a multicultural context.

**Key words:** association, family, solidarity, welcome, patriarchal culture, Lasallian legacy, identity, formation, Lay mission.

### A. ETHICAL VALUES IMPLIED IN THE THEME: “LASALLIAN FAMILY AND ASSOCIATION FOR THE EDUCATIONAL SERVICE OF THE POOR” IN AFRICA.

The perception of the Institute as a ‘family’ appeared in 1976 for the first time at the General Chapter and then in 2000 to describe *all those who participate in the Lasallian Education Project, especially those who become involved in a step of sharing in the spirit and the mission of Saint John Baptist De La Salle.*<sup>1</sup>

The concept of “Lasallian Family” open the way for an ecclesiology which defines the People of God as the “Church-Family” of God. Interdisciplinary approaches allow us to pick out the pertinence of the image “Church-Family of God” at the levels of theology, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, the Bible, ethics...

Taking note of this pluri-disciplinary approach, we situate ourselves, for our part, in the theological framework of an ethical and pastoral approach to the Lasallian Family in the African context. The Christian ethic equally discernable in the perspective of an Institute which wishes to be a ‘family’, can be founded on the values linked to the concept of ‘family’ itself. ‘*Ecclesia in Africa*’ highlights some values which are “*attention to others, solidarity, the warmth of relations, welcome, dialogue and confidence*”.<sup>2</sup>

We will examine some of these values in the precise context of Africa in order to pick out the forms of Lasallian commitment and the models of “fraternities” which they imply.

#### a.1 Attention to others and solidarity

We live in a continent marked by divisions, egoism and violence even in talk. Violence is always ready to show itself and impulses of solidarity ‘shrink’. We end up by getting used to it. The

<sup>1</sup> 42<sup>nd</sup> General Chapter, Cir.435, p.50, proposition 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ecclesia in Africa*, No.63.

egoism of some and the misery of others are habitually confronted and exploited. People throw themselves on their neighbor with indescribable brutality.

All this affects our commitment to the educational service of the poor. We are not always the heralds in regard to attention to others and in regard to solidarity. One is often struck by the gap that exists between the commitment of some and the overall project of their establishment for the educational service of the poor. Some are submerged under work while others live peacefully on the heritage of the Founder (all the advantages gained) and the first workers in the educational service of children and young people. The activity of one member of a family should interest all the other members because he is normally sent by it.

The evil is fortunately not without remedy for an Institute which wishes to build a family within the big family which is the Church. The history of the Church shows that God has always raised up, at appropriate times, men and women with generous hearts and spirits, who have emerged out of their seclusion to avenge themselves on the selfishness and malice of men by showing them love for the hate endured. John Paul II following the Synod Fathers could write: *“African cultures have a keen sense of solidarity and of community life. In Africa one cannot conceive of a feast with sharing with the whole village. In fact, community life in African societies is an expression of the extended family”*<sup>3</sup>.

The Lasallian Family will be built in a concrete manner with persons who are aware of “human solidarity” as an essential part of the search for the Kingdom. Beyond the solidarity between persons belonging to the same education team, we will have to imagine a solidarity which will expand towards other Lasallian education teams, towards other establishments. Solidarity between peers is not enough. Each of us needs to be recognized and attention is a first gesture, a first step which brings consideration and respect. Solidarity becomes a value to defend for our survival<sup>4</sup>

## **a.2 Welcome and the warmth of relations**

Beyond welcoming and warm relations, we need to see the question of hospitality or theologically the question of visitation. No one can deny that the Church in Africa is confronted today by the question of people who are rejected and outcasts and who are desperately looking for a place which will welcome them. It is a challenge and a difficulty which questions the capability of the Church in general and of the Institute in particular in maintaining its cohesion and that of the community of the faithful and of education teams. The abandoned have faces with multiple facets: adults, young people, children, the homeless, those without money, those without work.....

In traditional Africa, hospitality was a duty, an attitude which showed the other person that he was always welcome. But daily experience shows us that hospitality is incompatible with modern life. How could communities of Brothers be hospitable while at the same time respecting the intimate character of certain places? For how long are we going to offer hospitality to someone? As regards the Lasallian Family, we need to invent new modalities for receiving people without unfavorable prejudices. Welcoming the other person and the warmth of relations is a way of living and of forging the family links which unite people.

Thus hospitality poses a practical question, because it carries with it a decision to taken: if one admits that family spirit consists in promoting hospitality without exclusion, one cannot know in

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, No.42

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Saïdou Pierre OUATTARA, *La culture de l'amabilité. Comment penser autrement l'éducation en Afrique?* Paris, L'Harmattan, 2010, p.13.

advance what are the ends in view of which the conditions of hospitality could be determined.<sup>5</sup> How to welcome the unexpected (person) in our education teams and in our communities? Even if he is not expected, everything ought to be done to put up the unexpected visitor. 112

In proposing welcome among the values to be promoted in a Lasallian Family in Africa, we feel that this will allow us to create conditions for listening to the persons welcomed and thus opening a dimension which will give foundation to the hope of education teams. It is in this sense that the ethic of hospitality send us back to the idea of visitation: we welcome the other as a visitor whose visitation is going to surprise us, a visit without reciprocity, without exchange. This is what is meant by inventing the meeting between Lasallians, so that all will be integrated, welcomed into the family. Hospitality is an important value which will 'fertilize' the Lasallian Family.

### **a.3 Dialogue between persons as a sign of unity in the Lasallian Family in Africa**

In *Ecclesia in Africa* it is clearly indicated that “ *the attitude of dialogue is the means of being Christian within one’s community as well as with other believers, and with men and women of good will. Dialogue is first practiced within the Church-Family itself[...]; as well as among the faithful of different rites within the same Church.*”<sup>6</sup> Dialogue within the Church can be understood within the framework of the Lasallian Family. The dialogue is an effect of the charity which unites all the members of the Lasallian Family in unity of spirit. The special unity special within a work, in a community, in a country, are subordinate to the unity of the Institute.

The unity which we advocate is expressed, first of all, in the reciprocal relations of the members, in communication between persons. In our practices, dialogue is sometimes made difficult, hard to carry on. We meet in the same work, in the same establishment without hope of dialogue. The historic and human character of the Church is deduced from the fact that the foundation of the new Israel is not the faith or the charity of its founding members, but “the Apostles and the Prophets” in person. In fact, one does not establish a purely “mystical” structure on a human foundation. One builds a concrete association of real human beings. To succeed in dialogue, it is necessary to arrange occasions for meetings and outings so as to liberate speech. As Br. Pierre says, “*A human community is built and maintained thanks to the sharing of speech[...]. Speech, as the expression suggest so well, allows us to entre-tenir, that is to say both to link us with one another and to take care of us as a community*”.<sup>7</sup> This dialogue is a door opening on to the unity which will be recognizable in the communion of all in Christ.(Cf.Eph4,7-13).

In this contribution we have proposed a strictly limited subject. It consists in putting clearly the question: what is the reality of the Lasallian Family in its historic existence with regard to the African values of solidarity, hospitality and dialogue? To make a family you have to open doors, arms and hearts. From this fact, the acceptance of the other is a precondition. The mission for which we are gathering as a family is one: that of Christ! We should welcome each other as brothers and sisters in order to carry out this mission. The Lasallian Family ought to exist for education service. It consists, in fact, of being a family in order to be more visible and convincing.

<sup>5</sup> In the name of “universal peace” and of “universal hospitality”, Emmanuel KANT set strict rules and limiting conditions to hospitality, Cf. “project for perpetual peace” in ‘Oeuvres philosophiques’, T.3, Paris, Gallimard, 1986, pp.328-383.

<sup>6</sup> *Ecclesia in Africa*, No.65

<sup>7</sup> Saïdou Pierre OUATTARA, *Op.cit.*,p.35.

## A.4 Appendix

My reflection makes me propose what follows: to build a Lasallian replacement (force), to reinforce the Lasallian Family, we call upon past pupils, pupils, young professional people to take a year for God under two possible options:

- a Lasallian fraternity as a resident
- a Lasallian fraternity as a non-resident.

### a.4.1 A year for God full time in fraternity of life: Lasallian Fraternity

In fact, each young person can take a year for praying, for forming him/herself and committing to the service of God in sharing a fraternal life with other young people: Lasallian fraternity.

#### a) Fraternal life

In two fraternities, one of girls and another of boys. Each fraternity lives an autonomous life with its demands for material services, personal commitment, openness to others, sharing, mutual respect, silence which favours interiority and discernment.

#### b) Prayer

Searching to know Christ better and to love him better, presupposes devoting time to prayer:

- each day: the Eucharist, silent prayer and prayer in fraternity;
- each week: singing and animation work in the College with Catholic Action movements and with the pupils;
- at the beginning and end of the year: a retreat.

#### c) Formation

- *Content*: initiation in the Bible, Philosophy, Theology, the Sacraments and the History of the Church. Reflection on man, religion, ethical and social questions. Human formation: self knowledge, affectivity, management. Spiritual and catechetical formation.

- *Form*: this formation will be given in the form of lessons, workshops, mini-sessions, personal work, accompanying.

#### d) Mission

- Regular commitments: catechesis in the parish, at the chaplaincy, accompanying a Catholic Action movement, courses of religious reflection in classes, supervising homework, listening to pupils, work in the library....

- giving classes depending on your qualifications...

Each one participates in the cost of food thanks to the allowances given by the establishments for the services rendered. The costs of lodging, formation and the mission will be ensured by twinning, by international organizations; gifts are welcome.

#### **a.4.2 A year for God as a non-resident**

- fraternal life; joining the others whenever possible and especially at the weekend.
- prayer with the others : each evening.
- -formation; choosing modules depending on when you are free.
- the mission: taking a group of catechumens once a week.

In the immediate future the second option seem to suit many people...It is a reflection which can be set up little by little.

### **B. LASALLIAN FAMILY OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA**

The Lasallian Family (LSF) is so named because its members strive to follow the educational philosophy portrayed in the life and writings of St. John Baptist De La Salle, a French Priest born in Rheims (1651 — 1719) and founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools (known in Papua New Guinea –P.N.G.- as the De La Salle Brothers). Pope Pius XII proclaimed St. De La Salle in 1950 as universal and heavenly Patron of all teachers, including student teachers.

Lasallian Family members are mainly teachers, both Catholic (majority) and non-Catholic, as well as some people connected with schools' organization, and also some of the nursing profession. The members presently number about three hundred (300), and are spread in several provinces throughout the country. By the daily practise of the Lasallian Teaching Ministry, these Lasallians try to follow the pedagogical principles outlined by St. De La Salle, focusing on the real needs of the children entrusted to their care, seeing the school as a nursery of true Christians, and seeing their profession as a real vocation.

Lasallian Family (LSF) members are generally situated in the remote areas of their provinces, teaching for the most part in Primary Schools (children aged 8-14 years) and where basic materials are frequently lacking. Sometimes teachers will walk for two days and more from a main highway/township before reaching their destinations.

Initially, teachers respond most favorably to the story of de La Salle and his writings, are anxious to know more, and are most impressed by the witness in the classroom and staffroom given by their colleagues, already committed Lasallians who promote the Lasallian charism by their consistent Lasallian Teaching Ministry.

The strategy for maintaining the Lasallian commitment amongst the LSF members (so scattered as they are with little reality of community living) is to mail to the members the regular Newsletter, the Magazine two or three times a year and to reply to personal correspondence. These activities feature strongly in the day-to-day business of National La Salle Office in Mt. Hagen, Western Highlands Province of P.N.G.

Moreover, each of the seven or eight widespread areas in P.N.G. where the LSF is flourishing, has its own L.S.F. Area Gathering twice a year with a programme spread over 3-4 days. The National L.S.F. Gathering occurs every two years with a similar programme and occasionally overseas speakers are in attendance. Recently, in January 2011, a Presenters' Workshop was held here in Mt. Hagen where thirty committed Lasallians during the week long programme deepened their knowledge (and love) of our Founder and his significant contribution to education.

In the patriarchal culture of this country, female teachers especially seem to find in the Lasallian charism a gift that they treasure and work towards passing it on to their colleagues and pupils. In the schools, female teachers are regularly given positions of responsibility, thus allowing the committed Lasallian female teacher greater scope for exercising a Lasallian influence. 115

Lasallian membership currently stands at approximately three hundred spread right round Papua New Guinea.

### **C. THE *FROM* AND THE *IN* OF LASALLIAN ASSOCIATION. A VIEW FROM EXPERIENCE AND PRACTICE<sup>8</sup>**

Traditions, whether pedagogical (John Dewey), philosophical (Hannah Arendt; Marcel Blondel), theological (Schilleebeckx; J.B. Metz), sociological (Ricoeur, P. Bordieu) and of course the Lasallian pedagogical-spiritual tradition, have recognized the value of experience and practice in the construction of knowledge and in the interpretation of the world of life. Practice and experience are two concepts linked to the lived, suffered, reflection, interaction, action about, aims, norms, transformation. The construction of the Guide to Schools puts into evidence this dynamic. The pedagogical knowledge of the Guide is practico-experimental and not speculative.

Outlining this backdrop I ask myself about Lasallian Association: to explain it? to understand it? to practice it? Are the theory and practice of Lasallian association correlated with each other? Does the understanding of association, carried out from the origins, from the founding tradition of the Institute, from the lived, thought and practiced in diverse places and subjects by Brothers and Lay persons, enrich itself, enlighten itself and contrast itself in a critical manner?

I recognize the pertinence of the correlation between the given, *the Lasallian 'deposit'* (the meaning of association from the origins, the heroic vow of 1691 and the vows of 1694) and *the lived*, the present-day experiences and practices of Lasallian association in diverse historical contexts. In this sense, the contrasting and the appeal of these two *histories* is fundamental towards the rediscovering of the meaning of association.

This brief document has as its objective the presentation of some horizons of reflection on association in the light of my educational experience, my pedagogical practice as a Lasallian teacher and my theological job. I have structured the text in two parts: 1. Tensions and brief outlines of some theological reflections about association. 2. Future prospects for association.

#### **C.1. Tensions and some theological reflections**

I would like to begin this first part with some questioning: from the diversity of educational scenarios and subjects, from the special characteristics of our regional and local education projects, from the life of the Institute, what is meant by being associated, why? for whom? who can consider themselves Lasallian Associates. From my Christian and Lasallian vocation as a lay person, who is associated? What is the common and the particular of the association lived by the Brothers and the association of Lay Lasallians with them? Is every person, by the fact of working with the Brothers, sharing their being and their profession of teacher, already associated? Do conditions exist for succeeding in being so?

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<sup>8</sup> A reflection presented at the International Council for Lasallian Research and Resources, Rome, June 12<sup>th</sup> 2011

This collection of questions leads me to think of some tensions lived by association between Brothers and Lay Lasallians.

- The instrumentalization of association: put purely at the service of individual strategic interests (preserving Lasallian educational works in times when vocations are diminishing; work-finance stability for lay persons, etc.) This danger carries with it preoccupation with maintaining works and not ensuring the real presence of the Lasallian charism translated into the consecration of the Brother and the realization of the baptismal vocation to which Lay persons are also called. The meaning of association becomes reduced to the necessity of a “continuity of educational works” in the absence of the presence of Brothers. Association thus cuts itself off from the spirit of faith, of zeal, of the irrevocable nature of the love of God and creative fidelity to the *humanum*. But, at the same time, this instrumentalization can lead to the ignorance of the itineraries, stories and histories which integrate and unify the life of Brothers and Lay Lasallians in projects and horizons of sense; to denying the subjectivities, the transformation of persons and the consolidation of institutions

- Primacy of power over service: the epiphany of the other, an expression from Levinas, questions my liberty, my action. It is undeniable that, in the association between Brothers and lay persons, the question of power and the asymmetry coming from the experiences and conditions of life should be dealt with. It is important to rethink human actions as actions with others and not over others. In the same way, it is fundamental to recognize that these actions involve relations of coordination and of subordination between persons. The central question of association is not rooted in giving up posts, positions or institutions, but rather in mutually empowering ourselves, in becoming historic subjects of the mission to anticipate the Good News of the Kingdom. Association is linked to the power of kenosis, of belittlement in solidarity, of mutual support, of ecclesial synodality; of welcoming and allowing oneself to be welcomed, of allowing oneself having to share space and being dislodged by one's neighbor. Association is linked to the gift to the value of the link and not simply to the value of commercial exchange. This is, why faced by neo-liberal ideologies, association is contra-cultural.

- Association lived without an experience of faith (is?) without spirit. Association translates itself in to the internal cohesion of the community, of human beings united in charity; it can be pointed out that this cohesion is founded on adhesion to the good, positive and liberating plan of God, of the Kingdom. Association cannot arise in isolation from the action of teachers-Brothers-Religious, from the proximity of the Trinitarian God of the Kingdom, from the possibility of access to him through the *sequel Christi*, from closeness to human situations. Association is a hopeful, prophetic action but it FUNDAMENTALLY the action of the Spirit. Association is linked to the mission – it is for the educational service of the poor. But the ‘for’ of association is only understood in the ‘in’: for the service of the poor *in* the Spirit, *in* the *compassion of God* (recognizing, participating in and transforming the suffering of the other). Association implies taking seriously that the revelation of God is mediated by the option for the poor. This option is the option of God, it is pre-ecclesial (this act of God founds the action-mission of the Church).

- The primacy of the framework over what is engendered. Linked to the ‘in’ of association we meet the ‘from’: human situations, ecclesial reality-conditions, “available cultural beliefs” (Ricoeur), the symbolic capital (Bourdieu), etc. Association therefore cannot be lived, thought and celebrated in predetermined frameworks; it must be an act of community discernment, a communicative event. Association is a birth-giving, where the Christian and Lasallian life is recreated. In association not everything depends on our action. We have to be open to the unexpected, allowing for the renewal which comes from creative fidelity to the Gospel and to the Lasallian charism; in association we have to let God happen, we have to let God be God. It is from *association carried out* in different contexts that we can rethink the meaning of this and the identities of the associates. This *carried out*

*association* should be told and narrated in the light of the foundational story, of the totality of the life of Jesus. Birth-giving and narrative are correlated. The Brothers and Lay Associates can tell their story, sign on , reinterpret themselves and represent themselves in the social and ecclesial context. Association is thus a narrative event. 117

## C.2 Prospectives

I wanted to end this text by presenting some prospective which could help to open horizons of action with an eye to association:

- TO RAISE AWARENESS OF THE LAY IDENTITY-MISSION: the association of Lay Lasallians and Brothers ought to work primarily in deepening the identity of lay persons in the life of the Church. Facing centralism, ecclesio-centrism and clericalism, this task is essential. A declaration of the associate in the world of today will be necessary and urgent.

-IN COMMUNITY FOR THE MISSION: It is not possible to live association for the service of the poor without community. Association is profoundly ecclesial, since we do not believe only in the Church but along with it. Small communities with affective proximity and socio-political sensitivity will be privileged ecclesial structures living association.

- FROM ACTIVITIES TO THE EXPERIENCE OF FAITH: association requires us to evoke together the memory of Jesus Christ, to share, accompany the experience of faith and to discern together the signs of the times where we recognize the real presence of God and where the educational and evangelizing mission is seen to be questioned. The challenge at present is not just to believe but to believe together.

- FROM INFORMATION TO FORMATION-ACCOMPANIMENT: Association understood in the horizon of the mission, the community and spirituality demands ongoing, interdisciplinary, situated and organized formation; structures of accompanying for experiences of association between Brothers and Lay Lasallians which promotes mutual support, unity in charity, liberty in love and in the Spirit.

- FROM STRUCTURES OF PARTICIPATION TO DISCERNING THE MISSION IN COMMUNITY: the pertinence of participation is though out on occasions starting out from structures which facilitate it. But the structures *per se* do not promote the possibility of discerning, deciding together. Discernment requires the Spirit of Faith, but equally demands a capacity for deliberation, consensus and dissention, for the communicative praxis, not only between Lay Lasallians and Brothers but between the Lay Lasallians themselves who share the charism and the Lasallian education mission.