

ASSOCIATING FOR THE LASALLIAN MISSION

by Terry Collins

At the beginning of November, some eighty Lasallian people from all over Europe came together in the Brothers' Generalate House in Rome for a three-day colloquium (seminar) to examine the developments that are taking place in the Lasallian educational world in our times. Two thirds of the participants were lay people, many of them working in schools where there are few or no Brothers and convinced that the Lasallian tradition is worth holding onto for its own sake. It had a lot to do with the largely successful transference of the educational mission in Lasallian schools to lay people and the parallel adjustment in the roles of the Brothers. It was concerned above all with relationships; the relationships between Brothers and lay Lasallian teachers and the relationships among such lay Lasallian people by themselves. The whole complex set of ideas is encapsulated in the word 'association' or better still 'associating' since the -ing form emphasises the active nature of the undertaking. Associating is something you do, not something that just happens to you. It is about people and their commitment to a cause rather than about structures.

This is a very contemporary topic for debate and reflects something that is going on in the Church as a whole. It is time to rethink the whole thing at a fundamental level. We in the Lasallian world have our own particular contribution to make to the discussion. The need for a more widely developed form of Lasallian association today arises out of the increased complexity of modern society and the systems of education operating within it. In effect, association itself is becoming more complex in terms of the different partners involved. An association made up of just a single, homogenous group of people (like a Religious Institute) is no longer possible in today's world.

The discussions during the Colloquium looked at three main aspects of the Lasallian idea that association is something valuable for the fulfilment of the mission. First, people looked at "the dynamism of the past": the origins of the Lasallian story, when a particular form of association developed as a response to the circumstances of the time and the forces then operating in society. Secondly, they looked at the ways in which new forms of association have been developed in recent years in response to the changes and new forces in Church and society. Thirdly, they considered some of the ways in which association might be further developed in the immediate future, and the effects this could have on Brothers and lay people.

The various experiments in association that are taking place in different parts of the Lasallian world are all related to and focused on a mission. In Lasallian terms, mission and association are closely linked. Association for the sake of a mission is rooted in the gospel, but it took on a specific form in the story of De La Salle and the first Brothers. The driving force of the Lasallian story throughout three centuries has been the desire to respond to the urgent needs of young people, because they are nothing less than the children of God. The grounds for any future forms of Lasallian association can only be this same spirituality of a shared faith and shared zeal based on love. The Lasallian idea of association is that it starts from and exists for a specific mission: to respond to the urgent needs of young people, especially the poor. However, we all know that the circumstances in which the mission is being carried out today are changing rapidly. If our response to need is to remain effective, we must develop new ways of coming together for the sake of the common mission.

Association is primarily a matter of the spirit rather than of structures. It requires a willingness to share a common spirituality, a common mission and common resources in a joint effort towards a common goal. When it is lived on this level, association is a source of strength (synergy) through mutual support in the exercise of the common mission. The power of association comes from the power of the shared convictions. The greater the conviction, the greater the commitment to the enterprise. To have association, you need individuals who are willing to commit themselves to share life, work, mission, spirituality and goals. Conversely, commitment leads quite naturally to association. The two things are related at a deep level. Association, as a long term commitment for the sake of the mission, is a form of communion. For Christians there is a profound relationship between communion and mission by virtue of the presence of the Trinity in each one of us. In Lasallian terms this is expressed in the traditional formula of vows used by the Brothers since the beginning. Association is more than just a pragmatic means to an end. It is communion for the mission, engendered by the mission itself. The personal experience of communion in a mission is the ce-

ment of the Lasallian charism. People need this experience of communion, if they are to make the act of associating their own. Only after that can they begin to think about rules and forms of association. The experience of communion involves dialogue, exchange of ideas, exploring together the avenues of personal, spiritual growth, reflecting on the heritage and on its relevance and vitality today. Those who are associated in a communion need "a table" around which they can gather. They need visible signs of their communion, ways of communicating with one another and sharing with one another.

To say that structures are less important does not mean that they are unimportant. Association can take on many different forms and structures. Commitment leads to communion, and this in turn leads to the formation of a structured community or association. The general mission "to respond to the urgent needs of young people" becomes specific by being embodied in particular projects. The future of such projects depends on long-term commitments and some kind of permanent structure. Association is the coming together of individuals, each with his or her own gifts and talents, which they are willing to share in pursuit of a higher goal. Individuals are ready to give up part of their freedom, if they see that in return something worthwhile will come out of it. Communion as the relation between people needs structures, and the structures serve to reinforce communion.

The spirit of communion becomes incarnate in the structures of association. These structures can have many forms, and those forms themselves are subject to change. They can produce large or small institutions, formal associations with statutes and regulations or informal associations with minimal rules and maximal flexibility. In some countries such as France and Spain, the forms of Lasallian association will be much larger and more complex than in others. Larger associations need to be more highly regulated in order to maintain cohesion. In other countries, such as Great Britain, the smaller numbers involved, as well as the national temperament, will tend to produce less regulated forms of association.

Whatever the degree of formality in the structures of association, the intention behind them all is the same: to promote the original, Lasallian founding insight which says that for Christian teachers their source of strength lies in two things: - in their personal, inner, spiritual strength based on prayer and in the strength that comes from doing things together, "by association". It also operates on the macro-level of networks of schools. Thus in Britain we are moving towards a Lasallian Association of Schools, rather than an Association of Lasallian Schools, just as we have a Lasallian Association of Christian educators. It is the "associating" which is the Lasallian bit.

We are in a period of transition from one set of structures to another. A lot of things will have to change, and we must recognise the validity of new structures from other sources in the Lasallian world besides the Brothers. In Britain it is a sign of the success of the work of the Brothers and other religious orders since 1855 that the lay teachers are now well able to assume the burden of running the schools. Unfortunately for them, they are taking on the responsibility at a time when running Christian schools is becoming more and more difficult in a secular, hostile environment. This is precisely where the Lasallian tradition of association comes in. People find strength for their mission in association. Lasallian spirituality is not a piece of personal property exclusive to the Brothers and bound to vanish with them. It has its relevance on the wider stage of Christian education.

There are many different stake-holders in the Lasallian world involved in the current debate on association, and they are all quite distinct. There are the Brothers with the Rule and traditions of the Institute, lay teachers and others in Lasallian establishments, with or without Brothers, members of Lasallian Families and Signum Fidei groups, various kinds of experimental Lasallian communities, Lasallian Sisters. The goal is not to assimilate these various groups into one homogenous mass. However, some way must be found to bring them together into a single communion. We are embarking on a joint act of faith, moving hand in hand into the darkness of the future. As we explore new forms of association, no doubt we shall also discover new forms for the Lasallian mission.

In the course of the Colloquium there were some important pieces of in-put. There was a survey of the present state of the Lasallian educational effort in Europe by André Jacq. After that, Antonio Botana analysed the origins and nature of Lasallian association and finally Robert Carlier gave some pointers for the shape of things to come. It may be possible to print this material in future issues of LACE. In this issue we shall focus on the five testimonies given by people with very varied experiences of "Associating for the La-

sallian mission": in an experimental Lasallian Christian Community (Spain), in working to help immigrants (Italy), in lay participation in the upper levels of Institute administration (France), in a network of Lasallian schools (Belgium), in a school chaplaincy (England). Let the witnesses speak for themselves.

Conclusions in a Nutshell

The English speaking participants at the Colloquium included 4 from Britain (Terry Collins, Tom Campbell, Peter Siney and Steve O'Connor) 4 from Ireland (Columba Gallagher, Tom O'Neill, Brendan Ryan and Patrick Ward) and 4 from Malta (Dominic Rosso, Rose Griscti, Noel Abela and Godwin De Gabriele). Add to these the ubiquitous Ben Foy who attended by invitation as Secretary of CLEP (The Lasallian European Commission for Pastoral Care).

On the final afternoon, this group met to draw up its own conclusions from the proceedings of the Colloquium and to formulate the message it would like to take back to the people at home. Here are the results of their reflection on all that they had heard and experienced over the three days:-
The exploration of new forms of Lasallian Association is something that needs to be continued in each of our countries as a matter of urgency.

Since, in the words of Brother Alvaro Superior General, "people are more important than structures", we consider our essential task to lie in the promotion of the development of Lasallian People, with a shared Lasallian vision. It is important that we do not lose sight of the fundamental truth that association is for and with young people, and consequently they must be involved in whatever steps we take. We must plan to deliver the message on association not just in words but by providing people with living experiences.

We need to organise our own Regional Standing Committee for the Lasallian Educational Mission, parallel to the one established in Rome as a result of the recent General Chapter. This regional committee would have the responsibility of moving forward the necessary developments in Lasallian association in our countries.