

ASSOCIATING FOR THE LASALLIAN MISSION AS A SCHOOL CHAPLAIN

by Peter Siney

INTRODUCTION

My name is Peter Siney and I am the school chaplain at De La Salle School, St. Helens, England. I have been working in the school for just over three years and I am the first full-time chaplain to be employed by the school. My role involves preparing and leading liturgies, offering pastoral support and being a faith presence in the school. It arose out of an increased awareness for the need for someone with time and skills to devote to ministry to pupils and staff.

I am fairly new to the spirit of De La Salle and to the work and life of the Brothers, so most of my experiences of working in "association" come from my work within the Church. However I have noticed many similarities between the two.

I am reminded of Vincent Donovan's book *Christianity Rediscovered*. The book deals with the way Vincent Donovan approached evangelisation with the Masai in East Africa. On his return to America he was struck by the similarity between the Masai and the young people of his own country. A young person in an American university, reflecting on the line of thought presented in the book, offered some advice:

"In working with young people, do not try to call them back to where they were, and do not try to call them to where you are, as beautiful as that place might seem to you. You must have the courage to go with them to a place that neither you nor they have ever been before."

Obviously, association will not work if it simply means inviting the laity to follow the life of a Brother. This approach does not do justice to what makes each different approach special. We need to search for new ways to grow together, to form a shared understanding of what the Lasallian Mission is and what role we each have to play in fulfilling this.

THE PAST

In the past a school would more than likely be staffed solely by Brothers or have had one of the local clergy to come into school as chaplain. As time progressed, the numbers of people responding to this type of call has declined. Add to this the simple fact that those already in this ministry are not getting any younger and the problems are not difficult to discern.

- An increase in pressure on priests and Brothers for their time and energy means they are less available to minister full time in schools.
- Things that were happening and, perhaps, taken for granted, no longer happen.
- The possibility that nothing would replace what was lost - through a lack of commitment or understanding of the responsibility of being Christian or Lasallian.
- Did the sense of shared mission change when lay people 'took over' or did it remain the same? Was it a case of lay people doing the job in the same way as a Brother?
- When you work in a school with no presence of Brothers, how do you experience/encourage association and ownership of a shared mission?

THE PRESENT AND MY EXPERIENCE OF ASSOCIATION

This decline provoked a response, sometimes out of fear or panic, to find others to 'take over'. With this, people were forced to re-evaluate their own roles and responsibilities and to look closely at what is important to keep from the present for the future. Encouraging people is easier if they have had a positive experience to use as a foundation. This was certainly the starting point to my decision to become more involved in the life of the Church and in my understanding of what it means to be Lasallian. Gatherings and meetings of people with a common aim all help to encourage association: Pilgrimages to Lourdes, World Youth Days, Lasallian Youth Gatherings, etc.

A personal turning point was attending one of the modules at last year's SIEL here in Rome. The opportunities to share faith, experience and story with other Lasallians not only increased my awareness of what being Lasallian means, but left me with the feeling that I do not work alone, that I contribute a small part to the Lasallian mission alongside many others from all over the globe. Meetings like this one, anything that connects people (publications, magazines, newsletters, the Internet) can all help to create a sense of community and shared mission. It is only through listening to others, being challenged and having a real experience that we can truly understand "association" and have ownership of a shared mission.

THE FUTURE

Given all this, what does the future hold? I feel that our response to the current situation should not just be a reaction to the problems of falling numbers of Brothers or priests. We are a Church of resurrection not resuscitation and perhaps there are things that need to die in order to be transformed and renewed. We must not be afraid! We must think and pray about the future and be proactive in our response, taking action because it is the right thing to do. There are many questions and obstacles we are left with.

- How do you encourage/challenge people to increase their awareness and understanding of their own baptismal vocation?
- How can we help empower educators as ministers? Do they want to accept this? In what ways can we continue to develop a sense of shared vision?

We must not fear the future or look bleakly on the present situation. Problems can be seen as new opportunities, new challenges and places of growth. The Spirit can work in all things and God is much bigger than all of this!

My final words belong to Nelson Mandela, from his inaugural speech in 1994:

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you NOT to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It is not just in some of us; it is in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

Let us go forward then, renewed in faith and in answer to God's call, to serve the poor and needy just as John Baptist De La Salle did.