

ASSOCIATING FOR THE LASALLIAN MISSION - FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

by the Colloquium participants

During the Colloquium on "Associating for the Lasallian Mission", the participants divided into groups for a workshop session. People chose their groups on the basis of their interests rather than their first language. In spite of the inevitable translation difficulties, this technique produced a rich mix of views among people from widely different backgrounds in their practice of the Lasallian mission of education. People saw more clearly how the differences were accompanied by a single, shared vision on the nature and purpose of Christian education. What follows is a compilation of the outcomes from the group discussions, brought together under the main headings around which they converge.

Associating for the Mission

The development of "association" is a necessity for the Institute today. The time is right for it. The phenomenon can be approached negatively in terms of the decline in the numbers of Brothers or positively in terms of the increased numbers of lay Lasallians. Either way, close collaboration between the different groups of Lasallians is essential for the sake of the common educational mission.

The movement initiated by De La Salle and the first Brothers can still be shared by teachers today, whatever their religious and philosophical beliefs. The Lasallian educational mission includes a wide variety of people. All of them recognise that they are working for the same educational goal, but among them there are many who have a particular view of faith by which they see themselves as being called by God to this mission as a way of life, or vocation. "Lasallian association" is something that brings such people together, and it includes teachers, parents, voluntary helpers, former students and non-teaching staff. It is also good to see the large numbers of Lasallian collaborators who are non-Christians. The richness of this association between Brothers and lay Lasallians is a source of hope for the both.

At the same time, we must be very sensitive to the differences in the ways in which Brothers and lay staff commit themselves to association, taking into account their different situations. This is the only way to create the conditions for a genuine sharing which is an authentic communion rather than an attempt to make people accept a way of life they do not see as theirs. We must show great sensitivity and respect for the different levels of belonging and of commitment to the mission among lay staff. Nobody should feel either excluded or obliged to follow a particular journey which has overtones of a vocation. We may even need to promote the development of autonomous groups of lay Lasallian adults.

In a community of faith

Our mission is to proclaim the Gospel Word, so that others may come to know and to love the Lord. Our act of associating must be rooted in an awareness that, for each of us, the source of the Lasallian mission lies in our baptismal mission as members of the Church. Consequently, Lasallian association needs to be rooted in a community of faith. One cannot be a Christian by oneself, neither can one be a Lasallian by oneself. There needs to be a significant faith-community of adults in each school, and the promotion of this should be one of the school's pastoral goals.

The faith community of a school takes Jesus Christ as its first reference and secondly the charism of Saint John-Baptist De La Salle as Founder. Every effort should be made to enter into Lasallian spirituality as a way of being a Christian. A faith community involves love, but we must start from reality if we want love to bear fruit. There are different ways of living as a faith community. There are different degrees of belonging, different forms of community. This diversity is a richness to be cherished. We must allow all these different

approaches to develop freely. It is important to respect each individual and not to show any preference for those who appear more "associated" than others.

The Lasallian community of faith must discern its way of life and be faithful to it. It must be faithful to a life process rather than to a formula of words or a utopian idea. The community must accept the tension involved in evaluating whether or not its activity really relates to the needs of the poor. To find the road ahead, it must continually question itself and challenge itself to move forward, although it needs to share at the level of conviviality as much as at the level of spirituality and education. A Lasallian community, like any other ecclesial group, must be open to and active in the local Church and in the wider Church. Education for justice is an essential component of Lasallian activity.

Through a good Lasallian formation

We believe in the four pillars of association listed by Antonio Botana:- commitment, a shared spirit, communion, mission. The decision to associate oneself with others is the end result of a sometimes lengthy process of formation, a personal journey which includes a conversion experience and an awareness of being called to a mission. We need to set in motion a process which will lead people to make a personal commitment to association. It is time we started associating actively "with passion and patience", while respecting each individual's personal journey.

Lasallian formation needs to be improved in line with these developments. It should be made available to more people, to all those who want it, including parents. We should aim at developing a sense of belonging to the Lasallian mission among as many of the teachers in our schools as possible. For this reason, we need a process of formation for Brothers and lay people that is well co-ordinated and complete, which will help to make everyone aware of the Lasallian educational mission. Formation must not be something that is restricted to the few, accepted by some but disregarded by others. All those involved with young people, Brothers and laity, need a formation in which individuals feel that their personal journey is being respected so that they can develop at their own speed towards the level of association that is right for them.

Lay Lasallians can play their part in transmitting Lasallian spirituality, and it is important that they do so, but the formation of such formators is very important. It would be valuable and important to set up in our schools a programme of continuous formation to develop people's sensitivity to human values. This formation should be offered to adults (not just teachers) and to young people.

With suitable structures

It is right to emphasise the spiritual aspect of association, but structures are still needed to give it a base. The problem is to find new structures for the experience that lay people now have of "associating in a community of faith", in a way that is different from a Community of Brothers. The process of finding structures and building association will be a long one, and it must be freely based on mutual trust. The structures must be practical and must conform to the nature of association, otherwise they will simply hinder its development in spite of all our fine words. Our faith tells us that God will help us to find the right structures, as he helped St John-Baptist De La Salle in the beginning, and he will give us what we need to deal with the period of transition and development in which we are involved. Nevertheless, it would be good if some guidelines on the composition of "association" could be provided by the Institute.

There has to be a minimum set of clear goals which are agreed on by all and which are practical, dynamic, flexible, adaptable to circumstances and capable of being formulated in ways that suit local situations. The one main goal of "the educational mission to the young" must pervade all the varied form of Lasallian association. A Lasallian school is a Christian school in which Christians give witness to the gospel values while respecting other beliefs of teachers and students. The gospel, and De La Salle's way of responding to it, must always be there as a challenge requiring more than just ready-made answers.

Each individual's commitment to association must be personal and of a certain duration. At the same time we must accept the reality that, for lay people, family commitments take precedence over Lasallian commitments, although ideally their natural family and their Lasallian family ought to be mutually enriching. The essential thing is to give witness both as individuals and as a community, by being men and women who radiate both human and spiritual joy. We must talk from the heart as well as from the head, and our consistency as Lasallians must be evident to those around us.

We should also bear in mind that Lasallian association is not confined to our own establishments. There are many people living the Lasallian charism in other schools or environments who would like to be associated with us. This means that we must be willing to open up new kinds of links between Brothers and lay people and to work in projects that do not "belong" to the Brothers, collaborating with other people in other institutions. It is a matter of responding to new needs.

Various practical points

Rather than wait for structures to be put in place, we should be creative and inventive in finding ways of getting people to make a commitment and start to do something. At District level there is a need for projects which will make the Lasallian charism part of every day life. While remaining faithful to the Lasallian charism, we need to be more creative and innovative in our organisation and our way of operating.

To develop the network of association, it is desirable that there be more exchanges of students and teachers. We need to become more aware of existing Lasallian groups and movements. This can be done by meetings, exchange of letters, visits, web sites etc. We would like to see a regular European bulletin on association giving information about the various forms that are being developed. Awareness of diversity would be a source of enrichment and inspiration.

We must work at engaging young lay teachers in this process as early as possible. Good programmes of Lasallian formation should be offered to all new teachers coming into our schools. People should study the theological basis for their ministry just as much as the legal aspects of their profession. We should also help our former students by providing them with a formation, supporting their work and accompanying them on their journey. To produce the right kind of Lasallian formation programme, a working party should be set up (at European level) to draw up simple, practical guidelines. This formation programme should include, as a basic element, practical discussions on how to carry out the work of education. Everyone can start from that common base, whatever their faith commitment. There must be a place for people to exchange their experiences of lived reality.