

WHY LASALLIAN ASSOCIATION ?

by Brother Alvaro, Superior General

Eighty Lasallians, mostly lay people, from eleven different countries met in Rome last November for a Colloquium on the topic of "Associating for the Lasallian Mission". We give here a translation of the address given by Brother Alvaro to the full assembly.

I want to address my remarks mainly to the reasons for which Lasallian association exists. In philosophy we learn that, paradoxically, the final cause is the first cause because it influences the whole process from the outset and provides the goal towards which we are directed. That is why, when speaking about association, we should never forget the word "for". It is "association for", and in our case the "for" of our association refers to the educational service of the poor. That is what the recent General Chapter tried to realise, and it is the reason for our existence. Starting with the poor, we must be open to the needs of all young people. The most important aspect of association lies in the persons involved:- God himself, the people associating, the young, the poor. Our choices have to be made in terms of people rather than projects or structures or even values. It is only for the sake of people that it is worthwhile "losing one's life" in the gospel sense. We must not lose sight of the mystical element in association.

A few weeks ago I attended an assembly of the Sant' Egidio Community during which members of that movement explained to a large group of religious what it meant to them to belong to it. They all spoke with enthusiasm and conviction. During the exchange of views, one sister said that in her opinion the Sant' Egidio movement was now living through the mystical phase which precedes the formation of structures. In that phase the dominant elements are dynamism, creativity, enthusiasm and openness to the future. The sister went on to say, with some regret, that religious institutes seem to have gone beyond that phase and that these elements are consequently no longer much in evidence.

I would not wish to see the mystical aspect of association for the educational service of the poor being extinguished by a concern for structures, however necessary these may be. By the same token, I believe that the process we are going through can be a time of "refounding" for the Institute, and by that I mean the Brothers. It is a chance for us to start again, to find new strength, to look to the future, with help and support from you.

It is always a sign of hope when the Brothers and those associated with them in the Lasallian spirit look to the future in order to respond together to the enormous educational challenges presented by young people today. We exist for young people, and it is from them we must discover the way we ought to follow. While it is true that we are their teachers, we must remember that it is also right that we should become their disciples with minds open to receive what they have to teach us.

Personally, I think we need to leave behind a whole heap of prejudices that prevent us from seeing the positive side of the coin, appreciating the many valuable qualities in the young people with whom we are involved. There is enormous value and relevance in our work as teachers, companions, guides and friends to the young. I want to congratulate you and encourage you to continue with this splendid ministry which the Lord has confided to you. Your discussions during these days together will encourage you to live out your ministry with renewed hope and dynamism. That for me is the heart of "association".

We can apply to association what Saint-Exupéry says of friendship: it is not so much about looking at one another as about looking in the same direction together. For us this must be in the direction of young people, especially the poor. Our Institute was born in the face of a process of dehumanisation in a world where young people were far from salvation and had no chance of reaching their full potential as human beings and Christians. If we today are to be faithful to that original charism, we must "associate for the one mission" and respond creatively in the face of new forms of dehumanisation, new forms of poverty, in response to cries for help coming to us from the excluded.

We must never forget the original charism embodied in the work of De La Salle and the first Brothers responding in the light of faith to their encounter with poor, working-class children. Should not we also live out our own charism today among poor children who are still the most fragile and vulnerable element in our society? Not only is it common and widespread to find children suffering from abuse and lack of affection in broken families, but they face many other kinds of degrading situation besides. There are children who have to labour, children who are soldiers or victims of war, children who are sold, who are undernourished, deprived of education. And this list is by no means exhaustive. Regrettably, many of these unfortunate situations exist even here in Europe. Might not these very children be responsible for bringing new dynamism and vitality to our charism? Is not the Lord revealing himself to us chiefly through them?

It is in order to respond to these needs that we feel the need for association. The important thing is not to save our existing establishments, but to respond to the needs of young people at risk. One very important aspect of our discussions on association lies in questioning ourselves about the new forms of poverty that exist in Europe: refugees, drug addiction, young people for whom life has no meaning, who are looking for spiritual guidance. We must also sensitise the more fortunate among our students and make them aware of these realities. Every Lasallian school must take to heart the cause of the poor which was the origin of our association. May it please the Lord to inspire many young people to associate with us in building a more fraternal society. Without this, the whole future of our association is in jeopardy, whatever structures we may devise for it.