

In The Beginning

A Report of the Kintbury Conference which led to the founding of LACE

by Bro. Bernard Wescott FSC

The 1991 May Bank Holiday weekend at St. Cassian's, Kintbury, was a unique moment for Lasallian Christian Education in Britain. The conference hosted by St. Cassian's was called "Christian Educators Today: Help from the Lasallian Tradition". Over sixty participants took part (including Brothers, headteachers, governors, department heads, teachers and young adults from the Kintbury team), making the weekend the largest of the work-shops for teachers held twice a year in Kintbury since 1978. Cold Ash Centre, twenty-five minutes away on the other side of Newbury, provided single-room accommodation for nineteen participants; the others stayed at St. Cassian's.

The main speakers flew in from Rome: Brothers Joseph Hendron and Gerard Rummery, of the General Council of the De La Salle Brothers. Both had recently completed a formal visitation of the Province; both had been associated with St. Cassian's Centre since its beginnings in 1975, Joe as director of the community at that time and a member of the first Centre Team, Gerard as a visiting speaker during earlier catechetical conferences. Both speakers shared generously and inspiringly, from their expertise and knowledge of the Lasallian tradition, drawing on personal experience of the international Lasallian world in its historical and contemporary dimensions. The weekend was organised by Brothers Bernard Westcott and Damian Lundy. These four were joined by other participants in leading discussion groups during one part of the conference: Miss Philomena Nolan (from Weybridge), Brother Benet Conroy (Assistant Provincial), Christopher Lane (from Norwich) and a trio of younger members of the St. Cassian's team (viewing education through students' eyes).

It is difficult to summarise adequately the rich concerns of the conference. The group's explorations and reflections were centred on eight connected areas (in both historical and contemporary contexts):

1. The social and cultural setting of De La Salle's life, and especially his spiritual conversion through contact with the abandoned children he sought to help.
2. The discoveries and developments of principles and practices which characterised the Christian schools founded by De La Salle and his Brothers "together and by association".
3. Ways in which De La Salle's synthesis of theology, prayer and the practice of Christian education brought creativity and maturity to his writings.
4. The sharp focus upon the 'salvation' of children as the principal aim of Christian schools: a process of education to bring young people into freedom to live the Gospel.
5. De La Salle's phrase 'touching hearts' as an understanding of Christian education - exemplified in the early Brothers' practice of the daily "reflection" in class, (a practice for which there is room today).
6. Emphases on justice and service in Christian education as creating an obligation for the young "disciples" to be actively involved in helping others, not only for the sake of those whom they serve but in order to live the gospel and be freed by it.
7. An understanding of the teacher's work as real ministry in the church.
8. The challenges offered to Christian educators in contemporary Britain, given the emphases and pressures associated with recent educational reforms, and given an understanding of the Lasallian heritage as a living tradition.

Reflection in the conference room was continued in the context of prayer and liturgy (Fr Robin Gibbons from Kensington leading an inspiring Eucharist on Saturday evening), as well as during the excellent meals and relaxation afforded by St. Cassian's Centre. Animated exploration continued into the early hours! Members of the group grew noticeably more confident and clear in the conviction that their ministry is especially significant today. Two important aspects of the conference were the discovery by lay teachers of the relevance and importance of the Lasallian tradition for them (especially the concepts of service to the poor and 'together and by association'); and the discovery by the Brothers taking part of the value of sharing our traditions with our lay colleagues.

This is the first time since the Tercentenary Christian Education conference at Hopwood Hall in 1980 that the De La Salle Brothers in Great Britain have sought to explore the specifically Lasallian understandings of education with their lay colleagues at a national level. Given the emphases of our 1986 General Chapter, the conference may be regarded as somewhat belated. We were reminded of the successful way in which Lasallian educators in France have developed a national in-service programme which is bearing remarkable fruit.

Some Brothers present expressed surprise at recognising the value attached by lay colleagues in Lasallian and other Catholic, schools to the heritage we were exploring together. The weekend will be an impetus to continue sharing that exploration. Although, three lay heads of schools in the Lasallian network took part in the conference, no Brother head teachers were present. This was noticed by some participants and was regarded as a disappointment: we all have something to learn from one another, as well as something to offer from our experience. Some schools from the Province were not even represented at the conference. Collectively we still have a long way to go.

And go we must! The conference ended with an enthusiastic endorsement of the proposal to set up a more permanent structure for a Lasallian Association for Christian Educators (LACE). Recommendations for ways forward came from one of the groups. Chris Lane (of Notre Dame, Norwich) and Michael Hockley (of St. Joseph's, Ipswich) will meet soon with Damian Lundy, Bernard Westcott and John Deeney to work out the practical details. The first will be to send to participants in the St. Cassian's weekend a copy of this report with a list of names and addresses, and suggestions for future plans. Whatever name we use, this will be the British Province's way of living and understanding at a national level what has come to be known in the international Institute as The Lasallian Family.

Thanks must be given to Joseph and Gerard for four complementary presentations of exceptional quality, as well as for their energetic and sympathetic engagement with the group as a whole and with many individuals. For the two writers at least, the conference consolidated the recent visit to the Province of our two General Councillors. The experience impressed on us the need to work out and organise the management and direction of the Lasallian family in Britain today. This must surely be a major concern of the 1992 District Chapter of the Province. It will certainly receive attention during the months leading up to that event.

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