

OUR LASALLIAN ASSEMBLY, OCTOBER 2003

by Bro Terry Collins FSC

Introductions

There were thirty-nine of us altogether, and we just about managed to fit ourselves into one circle around the Saint Cassian's conference room: thirty-nine Lasallians of all shapes and varieties with our different stories united by the one overarching story. Our individual reasons for coming were no doubt equally varied and complex, but there were some declared goals that we shared from the outset. In general terms, the idea was to bring together the different parts of the Lasallian Family in Britain, and as such it was an overdue follow-up to the meeting of February 2002 in Oxford. We were looking to reinforce the links between the assorted Lasallian groups that have emerged in recent years by sharing ideas on what being Lasallian means to us. We hoped to clarify our thoughts and feelings on, and deepen our understanding of, what and who we are, individually and collectively. We also hoped that, having taken stock of where we are in our Lasallian journey, we could go on to think about future developments and the potential for a new lease of life for the Lasallian presence in Britain after 150 years. At the back of our minds there was (especially for the Brothers present) the more specific question as to how this Lasallian Assembly might fit in with and contribute to the District Chapter to be held in 2004.

The spirit of the occasion was neatly summed up in a beacon quote from Joseph Blenkinsopp:

" A people retains its vitality, even its identity, only at the price of continually re-thinking and re-appropriating its traditions in the light of new situations, especially when those situations are of a profoundly disorientating kind."

(Wisdom and Law in the Old Testament , 1983. p. 105.)

The Web of Providence

Brother Benet started us off with a power-point presentation of the story of St. John Baptist de La Salle, which he described as the story of a call and a lifelong response to that call. It was a vocation which De La Salle himself summed up later in the words: "God has chosen you to make him known to others". This is the vocation which unites all Lasallians, whatever their particular situation or sphere of action. Benet's presentation put into sharp focus what John Deeney has called "The Web of Providence", that is to say the web of inter-related people and circumstances in the life of De La Salle, which gave such significance to his apparently chance meeting with Adrian Nyel on the doorstep of a convent in Reims. It proved to be a turning point in the life of the young priest, a symbolic threshold and an existential door opening onto a new direction in his lifelong journey. It led to the first step in what was to be an ever-increasing involvement with the work of founding Christian schools. He was prepared for this moment of challenge because of his deep spirituality based on a faith, which made him open to the possibilities that arise when we see the guidance of God at work in all the things that happen to us.

St. John Baptist de La Salle allowed himself to be led by the hand of Providence, and it changed his whole life. He broke with his past and embarked on a journey into the unknown with a new set of companions. His initial decision led, step by step, to the formation of an organised group of men committed to working together for the education of poor children. It led to the foundation of a network of schools, which De La Salle always referred to as "God's work". His belief that he was doing a work initiated by God gave him the strength to see things through to the end in spite of all kinds of difficulties and obstacles. He sought to communicate that same strong, uncomplicated spirituality to those who chose to associate themselves with him, his "Brothers", so that they would find the strength to carry on God's work in the schools.

Setting the agenda

Benet then went on to outline the story of the Lasallian work in Britain, which developed from quite small beginnings, 150 years ago, and grew in all sorts of directions through many ups and downs. The punch line came in his conclusion that we Lasallians in Britain today have reached a turning point in our story. Like De La Salle, we are on our own symbolic threshold in front of a door that is opening towards a new stage of

our existence, although it will entail a break with some aspects of the past in order to remain faithful to the essence of our founding inspiration. We are caught up in our own "Web of Providence" and are being invited to go forward in a new direction.

Thus the agenda was set for the next day and a half of the Assembly. Such a gathering provided an opportunity to reflect on our story, to see where we have come from, where we have reached and where we are going. It was an invitation to imagine the future possibilities, to generate a new Lasallian vision for our times. People were asked to take this process forward by going off in Emmaus-type pairs to share their individual stories and their visions of the future. After that we assembled in a body to reflect on the ideas that had emerged in the course of the morning, either in the Emmaus pairs or as a result of Benet's presentation. The next step was for the different Lasallian groups to meet to talk about how they might develop their particular Lasallian mission and identity together. The result was a general taking stock of the present state of the Lasallian presence in this country, so that a kind of "Lasallian Map of Britain" emerged, a picture of something that is unified and yet at the same time criss-crossed by various lines of links and boundaries which overlap.

The Lasallian Map of Britain

The De La Salle Brothers

We are the ones most affected by the process of "re-thinking the tradition" referred to by Blenkinsopp. In many ways we embody the tradition and we carry the store of memories of our 150 years history in these islands. Consequently, we feel more profoundly affected by the disorientation that results from the changed situation in which we find ourselves. We are acutely aware of the need to re-examine our identity and the whole nature of the Lasallian vocation today. We are aware of our responsibility to hand on the tradition of which we are the custodians, so that it can live on in new ways. We are encouraged by this Assembly, which has brought us a clearer realisation of the way in which the other Lasallian groups are now flourishing. This is a source of hope and a sign of blessing for the future.

School Governors and Headteachers

We are very aware of the challenges facing the Lasallian work in the schools we have to operate today in the context of a complex, multicultural society, characterised by secularism and the loss of faith which pervades the families of the children who come to us. We are aware of the many problems relating to finance and trusteeship that have to be faced, and the demoralising effects of the bureaucratic culture, which dominates and depersonalises our schools through the weight of external regulations. At the same time we are confident that these challenges can be met and that the Lasallian tradition is well placed to do so by promoting greater collaboration across the whole of the Lasallian network. Contacts already exist between schools at the level of the headteachers' conferences, and these need to be taken further, perhaps by developing working parties to study particular problems and questions. This Assembly has revealed the possibility of cross-pollination between the schools and the other Lasallian groups. This is an avenue of development that needs to be explored. The groups can help the schools, and the schools can help the development of the groups.

Lasallian Developing World Projects

We are organised around the very Lasallian idea of building for education. Since our small beginnings in 1985, the Projects have grown and flourished. The main problems we have encountered are those related to fund-raising and to the political "situations" that can develop unexpectedly. Apart from the concrete results of the buildings we erect, the Projects provide a profound experience and an opportunity for personal growth for those who participate in them. They are a practical expression of a living faith in action, and they give participants a valuable experience of living in community. For the future, besides developing the Projects even further, we feel the need for some kind of follow-up which will give people the chance to talk about their experiences with people who understand. We need a forum for sharing and support. This could be done on a regional basis, and our regional groups could benefit from links with similar groups of Former Kintbury Teams.

Kintbury Teams

Our first meeting took place in the year 2000, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the opening of the Retreat Centre at St Cassian's. Since then, we have met half a dozen times, partly for friendship and mutual support, but also to reflect on our continuing mission. We have even developed a mission statement. There is a substantial diversity in our membership, both geographically and in terms of people's interests. We are looking for a focus. Maybe the way forward is for the different Lasallian groups to re-organise themselves into groups based on interests and activities, rather than according to historical origins as at present. One possibility for a such a cross-over group would be the revival of the "Lasallian Resource" group, which gave such practical help to the network in the past.

Former Brothers

We are very aware of the valuable, spiritual inheritance we received in our training as Brothers. The Lasallian ideal has remained with us and has inspired our educational work ever since. We welcome the overdue initiative to recognise us as part of the Lasallian Family. At the same time, we find it artificial to be labelled in terms of what we used to be ("ex-Brothers"). We are all in favour of developing links with other Lasallian groups and merging with them to form new groups based on interests and projects.

LAMB (Lasallian Mission in Bristol)

We began as a local group of former Kintbury team members working in schools in the Bristol area. We felt encouraged and inspired by the assemblies of Former Teams to develop our particular Lasallian mission. We see ourselves as responding to the needs in schools by bringing faith-development to individuals through retreats and youth days. We have already established a central base for our work, and our group includes Lasallians from other groups in the network. Looking to the future we want to see the establishment of a new Lasallian community in Bristol. It would be a centre of inspiration for us in our work in the schools: supporting chaplaincy work, supporting teachers, acting as prayer leaders, giving a personal witness of Christian love. This community would be modelled on the Kintbury community and would include Brothers and young team members. We feel there is a real urgency about this proposal.

LACE (Lasallian Association of Christian Educators)

We have been in existence since 1991, initially as an association of teachers in Lasallian schools, which gradually widened to include teachers from other schools, who are in tune with the Lasallian approach to education. The main goal of LACE is to provide support for teachers – support of a professional nature but also spiritual support. We have traditionally organised two conferences a year. The meetings are not restricted to teachers of RE, but in practice they are the ones who come most, with additions in recent years from the new kinds of school chaplaincies. One of our difficulties arises from the fact that each school approaches LACE in a different way, and consequently there is an uneven quality in communications about our activities. Our main difficulty stems from the pressures that afflict schools today: financial restrictions, bureaucratic work-load, lack of curriculum time, endless tests and examinations etc. Many teachers who would like to come to the LACE conferences are unable to do so, or can only manage one a year. In recent years there has been a noticeable trend in favour of the May conference, while the October conference is poorly attended. It may be a providential sign that a weekend in Kintbury is becoming available just when the other groups of Lasallians are feeling the need for one. We would see this as a positive development and would be happy for it to become a permanent feature in the Lasallian association in Britain. We also produce a LACE Magazine twice a year. This could easily be expanded to become a vehicle for all the other Lasallian groups.

Conclusions: The Web of Providence is still being woven.

We all agreed that the Assembly was a success and that it had served a valuable purpose. The branches of the Lasallian Family are now so many that it is essential for us to meet together "as a family" on a more regular basis.

- In the short term, we should plan for an annual assembly, at least for the next few years until we see how things develop. Such assemblies will allow us to monitor what is going on and give us occasion to encourage one another in exploring new forms of Lasallian mission. However, more thought needs to be given to the way in which it is decided who will attend the assemblies. The "invitation" system used for this assembly will not be good enough in the future.
- In the long term, we should look towards the establishment of local Lasallian groups, which would meet more regularly than once a year. These groups would be based around some local activity and would embrace people from the various Lasallian groups that now exist independently.
- The year ahead will be a significant one for Lasallian Association, since it marks the 150th anniversary of the arrival of the first Brothers in England. This will be an ideal opportunity for us to work together as a family to plan a new chapter in that story. A committee, chaired by Siân Grant, is already busy working out ways in which the academic year 2005-2006 can be a special Lasallian Year and the start of something new.