

LASALLIAN EDUCATION AND CHURCH COMMUNION

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On Tuesday 20 November 2007 in the Aula Giovanni Paolo II, a Vatican press conference was held to launch a document of the Congregation for Catholic Education entitled "*Educating Together in Catholic Schools: a Shared Mission between Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful*" [The English translation may be downloaded from the CES website, cesew.org.uk. Click on "News and Events – Latest News – November 2007".]

It is immediately evident that the title uses expressions that have a very Lasallian ring to them, such as 'educating together' and 'shared mission'. This is something which merits further investigation, and indeed a closer examination reveals that the document contains a number of passages that are reminiscent of the language in the Lasallian documents on Association and Mission with which we are now familiar.

Here are some of the more obvious examples.

- As well as gaining knowledge, students must also have a strong experience of sharing with their educators. [para. 2].
- It is precisely the presence and life of an educational community, in which all the members participate in a fraternal communion, nourished by a living relationship with Christ and with the Church, that makes the Catholic school the environment for an authentically ecclesial experience. [para. 4].
- Catholic educators need a "formation of the heart": they need to be led to that encounter with God in Christ which awakens their love and opens their spirits to others, so that their educational commitment becomes a consequence of their faith, a faith which becomes active through love. [para. 25].
- With the gradual development of their ecclesial vocation, lay people become increasingly more aware of their participation in the educational mission of the Church. At the same time, they are also driven to carry out an active role in the spiritual animation of the community that they build together with the consecrated persons. [para. 32]
- The shared mission, besides, is enriched by the differences that the lay faithful and consecrated

persons bring when they come together in different expressions of charism. These charisms are none other than different gifts with which the same Spirit enriches the Church and the world. [para. 36]

The ideas and even the phraseology of these extracts are something that we Lasallians are very familiar with. It is as if the writers in the Congregation for Catholic Education have been reading some of the things written in our Institute documents since the General Chapter of 2000, which launched us on the exploration of 'association' in a serious way. These similarities become more understandable when we note that there was in fact a Lasallian insider on the working group that produced the document. The panel that presented the document on the occasion of the Vatican Press Conference included three people: Cardinal Zenon Grocholewski, the Prefect of the Congregation, Monsignor Angelo Vincenzo Zani, the Undersecretary, and Professor Roberto Zappalà, a layman who is a lay head in one of our Lasallian schools in Italy. As President of the Liceo (Secondary School) Sections of the Istituto Gonzaga in Milan, he has been very much involved in the development of "association" in the District of Italy. He also participates regularly in the meetings of the Lasallian Headteachers of Europe (ASSEDIL).

In his contribution to the press conference, Roberto pointed out that the document has two main lines of emphasis: the need for schools to become educational communities and the need for appropriate training (formation) in order to achieve this. Both these themes have appeared regularly in our Lasallian writings and in the discussions at Assemblies in our own District, but we have tended to give most attention to the topic of formation. Consequently, I think it would be useful to focus here on what the formation is 'for', namely the concept of an educational community, and on the links to a particular view of the Church as 'communion'.

The ideal of 'educating together' expressed in the document's title is based ultimately on the Second Vatican Council's theology of ecclesial communion. The Sacred Congregation's document sets out to highlight the role of the Catholic school within that Church communion and to explore its 'ecclesial

identity'. It is because of its role in the life of the ecclesial communion that the Catholic school, more than others, should present itself as an educational community, which enables people to live an experience of communion in which values are shared and in which a spirituality of communion is developed. The document recognises that this is not an easy matter, and that if people are to become part of an educating community they will need a specific training in community, which can only be done in and through an experience of community. Finally, the word 'communion' implies that the school community must not be an inward looking, closed community but one that is 'open'. The educational community is open when it is involved in a network of relationships and interactions, with society, with the families and with the Church both locally and universally.

All this is very relevant in the light of today's debate on inclusion and community cohesion. In this connection, therefore, it is interesting to remind ourselves of what we wrote in the Axioms of Lasallian Education, produced back in 1993, produced by the Lasallian headteachers of Great Britain and adopted by the Congress of European headteachers.

- Axiom IV. In and by Association. The educational goals of a Lasallian school are attained "in and by association", through the collaboration of teachers, students, parents and governors, who share the same outlook and support one another in working for it. Everyone involved in a Lasallian school has a part to play in forming a living educational community based on mutual respect and acceptance of one another
- Axiom V. For the Mission. The Lasallian school is outward-looking, because it shares in the mission of the universal Church and of the local Church. It prepares young people to take a mature and productive place in society and in the Church as free and responsible citizens. It reaches out to the world which surrounds it, and develops international links through the Lasallian network. In particular, it shows a special concern for the poor:- for young people who are disadvantaged, underprivileged, excluded or marginalised in any way.

Like it or not, Lasallian education is closely bound up with the life of the Church as a local community and as a universal communion, and there should be no room for any anticlerical bias in the Lasallian world.

It is true that the links between Lasallian Association and the theology of ecclesial communion have not been given much headline attention over recent years. Still, it *is* there in the documents, and nowhere more clearly than in one of the first Institute writings on the subject, the 1997 document from the General Council entitled *The Lasallian Mission of Human and Christian education – a Shared Mission*. Section 3.3 of that work explores the idea of Shared Mission as an aspect of Church communion. It talks of 'communion and the Lasallian heritage' and 'the process that links communion and mission' and of 'communion in mission as ministry'. The whole thing is well worth reading again today, but one quote just has to be made here.

- "... we can understand ministry as a peak expression of communion. The ideal of shared mission would be, in that perspective, the formation of a ministerial community among those who share the Lasallian mission. This new ministerial community has to be for the Lasallian school the sign that the Kingdom of God is made present and grows in this space". (p.95)

So in a way, the Vatican document does not tell us anything new. However, it does open up new perspectives on what some people think is a specifically Lasallian thing. Our efforts in association are part of a wider phenomenon that is a feature of the life of the whole Church, the communion of saints, and it is encouraging to see that the ideas we are trying to promote are understood and shared by those who have the unenviable task of showing leadership in that multi-faceted community.

- In many religious Institutes, sharing the educational mission with the laity has already existed for some time, having been born with the religious community present in the school. The development of "spiritual families", of groups of "associated lay people" or other forms that permit the lay faithful to draw spiritual and apostolic fruitfulness from the original charism, appears as a positive element and one of great hope for the future of the Catholic educational mission. [para. 28]