

Together and by Association

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In 1686, on the Monday after Trinity Sunday, St. La Salle and a small group of his earliest Brothers walked along the country roads of Champagne to the church of Our Lady of Liesse. Here they expressed their consecration and their special identity by pronouncing vows to live in association with the Brothers of the Christian Schools. Over 321 years later 25 De La Salle Brothers walked along that same route to that same shrine and pronounced very similar vows expressing their consecration, 'to live together and by association'. As we walked along in prayerful silence we considered how we are today living our mission together with and in association with our Founder and his companions. A few days earlier we 21st century Brothers, representing the Lasallian mission world-wide, had prayed at the retreat centre of Parménie. In a letter to De La Salle, dated April 1st 1714, while he was in Parménie, the principal Brothers wrote:

Having in view the greater glory of God...we very humbly beseech you and we command you in the name and on the part of the body of the Society to which you have vowed obedience, to take up once again the general government of the Society.

We felt deeply for our Founder, tired and in ill health, overwhelmed by the problems his young Society was facing up in Paris especially, yet courageously leaving the peaceful serenity of this Alpine retreat and taking the long hard journey north to be 'together and by association' with his Brothers there. Many of the CIL group were unsure of their next assignments. Some knew and were very concerned about their ability to cope with their new jobs, but 'together and by association' with the example of our Founder, they accepted the challenges presented to them.

The Rome Archives have many documents about the early years of our pioneer Brothers in this country. It is my privilege today to be a member of our London Community living 'together and by association', not only with my present community but also with that first London Community who, a century and a half ago, responded so courageously to the urgent needs of Christian education for the boys of that time in this city. We live 'together and by asso-

ciation' with all those Brothers who have lived the history of our mission in this country.

In 1960 Br. Maurice Auguste published 'Les Voeux des Frères des Ecoles Chrétaines Avant la Bulle de Bénoît XII' in *Cahiers Lasalliens* 2. The 1966 Chapter began a process that allowed our Institute to come to a greater awareness of the central importance of our Vow of Association. Twenty years later we recovered the vow of 'association for the educational service of the poor'. The Millennium Chapter proposed a unified reading of the entire Lasallian life journey in the context of that foundational moment: 'The foundation event which links the Institute today to its origins is that of June 6th 1694, when John Baptist de La Salle and twelve of his followers came together to consecrate themselves for life to the Christian education of poor boys'. The Chapter goes on to assert that 'the original vow... is the source of Lasallian association of lay persons and religious who wish to be part of the Lasallian Mission'. The 2007 General Chapter recognized that we are a 'ministerial fraternity for Christian education'. Thus our identity is to incarnate prophetically communion for mission, and we live out that identity 'as consecrated people as a prophetic sign of the identity of the Church, a mystery of communion' (Horizon 1.2.1. Theme 3).

This model of Church as 'communion' evolved from the documents of the 2nd Vatican Council, particularly *The Church in the Modern World*. Pope John Paul II observed in his encyclical, *Redemptoris missio* (1990) that 'The commitment of the laity to the work of evangelisation is changing ecclesial life.' It is often said that this recognition is merely a result of the decline in the numbers entering religious life. But that is not the understanding of those theologians who write about this 'time of communion' in the Church. In his Millennium address, *Novo millennio ineunte*, Pope John Paul II challenged all Christians 'To make the Church the home and the school of communion'. The concept of 'Association' as it used by those who wish to share the Lasallian charism and be consciously part of the Lasallian tradition, is an aspect of this model of 'communion' in the Church. Our lay colleagues no longer come to us seeking crumbs from our spirituality table, but

rather for 'responsible participation of all in the Church's mission of carrying forth the Gospel of Christ...the source of hope for humanity and the renewal of society' (*Christifideles laici*, 1988).

So, here we are in 2007 looking forward to our District Chapter in May. We live 'together and by association' with our founder and the earliest Brothers, and with the pioneering Brothers of our District. We share this charism, 'together and by association' with all those Brothers who subsequently live the history of our mission in this country. Our global Institute means that we live 'together and by association' with Brothers, living in communities throughout the world, each of us responding to the vast range of needs to which God calls us. As a District we share the charism that God gives as a

gift to the Church, first to St. De La Salle, and, subsequently to the many thousands of disciples and followers of our Founder. The gift did not belong to De La Salle, just as it does not belong to us. There are many in the Church of today who want a share in that charism; who want to transform their job, their profession, into a vocation, accepting God's designs on them for the Christian education of the poor. The members of our District must listen to those who identify themselves as Lasallian associates. The Lasallian Assemblies are particularly useful for this purpose. Our District Chapter should respond to this call by developing appropriate opportunities to share our charism. We Brothers need to come to a fuller appreciation, by prayerful discernment, of the significance of our vow of association so that our lives truly represent our identity as De La Salle Brothers.