

The Lasallian Group of the St. Gabriel's System

Ann M. Cahill

Revisiting Dot Clark's¹ prophetic challenge delivered at the May 1990 Awards Dinner for the St. Gabriel's System reveals the patient, persistent prodding of the Holy Spirit in our midst. Because her pertinent questions still resonate today, I want to re-examine her words and the fruit they bore:

I was intrigued with the concept of Christian Brothers and laypeople joining together with the common bond of Saint La Salle's vision and the work we had chosen. I waited, sometimes impatiently, for something to happen that would involve me in the Association that offered such a promise.

I had no idea of the importance of Association to the Christian Brothers. When Saint John Baptist de La Salle set up the "Society of the Christian Schools" in 1694, the spirit of association was a central aspect of his work. This was not merely a theory: it was a deciding factor in the running of his schools, in the founding of Brothers' communities, in the organization of classes and of teaching. May I suggest that we are in a different era today? Walls are breaking down in the Church, and the search for the meaning of Association parallels the re-discovery of the power of Association.

I feel as though I am among friends here tonight and can speak freely. Even if I have not worked directly with you, I feel a common bond with you as a member of the St. Gabriel's System. Please accept what I have to say in the spirit of collegiality. I am not a theologian or an expert in the Lasallian tradition, but I have had some marvelous experiences at the Heuther Workshop in Chicago and the Christian Brothers' Workshop in Adamstown. There has been much input, and in a brief time I would like to share some of my reflections with you. Please accept them as an invitation to further discussion rather than as a definitive statement on Association.

Many of the Brothers and laypeople in this room have shared their ideas on Association with me both formally and informally. There is a wealth of written material which has been generously shared with me and which has whetted my appetite for dialogue with those who see a value in Association. I would like to thank Brother Robert for the opportunity to speak to you tonight and perhaps to act as a catalyst to enable those who are interested to explore Lasallian Association and see if it has value for us.

Whether we articulate it— whether we even acknowledge it—all of us in this

1. Dot Clark "retired" from her position as Assistant Principal of De La Salle Vocational School, Bensalem, PA, in 1998 and now works part-time at the St. Gabriel's System administrative office, Philadelphia, PA.

room have been associated with the Christian Brothers in many different capacities for a significant part of our lives. Our work with the young men in the St. Gabriel's System is an outstanding example of what Saint La Salle wanted in that we work directly for the poor, providing an education for economically deprived victims of social injustice, delinquents, and those neglected by the rest of society.

I say "our" work because it is obvious that the number of Brothers in the St. Gabriel's System has diminished significantly over the last decade, and the role of laypeople has been expanded to include administrative positions as well as direct services. This is an evolution which is progressing, not necessarily without pain or consternation, but it is happening.

Brother Mike McGinniss (in the excellent seminar report, *A Sense of the Future*, Romeoville, IL: Christian Brothers Publications, 1990) defines Lasallian Association as union in spirit and action of Brothers and their colleagues in Saint La Salle's vision of a community of faith and zeal dedicated to the Catholic Christian education of the poor. This shared ministry has been a dynamic in the Christian Brothers' schools from the beginning.

What does Association have to do with you and me? If you are a Christian Brother, it may appear fairly obvious—you took a vow of Association to commit yourself to your community in a special way, to bind yourself to other men with like ideals, to be of service in the education of the poor. Only you, as a Christian Brother, can begin to answer the question of your role in the new structure of Lasallian Association.

As a layperson, I have had difficulty (and I don't believe I am alone) with the vocabulary to use in describing my affiliation with the work of Saint La Salle. Is one person's job another person's vocation—a commitment—a gift—a vision—a charism—

a paycheck? Each of us working in the System will have to answer for himself or herself.

All of us will have to look into our lives to discover what we can offer to each other in Association. Brother Mike suggests that if the Brothers draw closer to their colleagues in concrete forms of Lasallian Association, they will have to look critically at themselves and their operative beliefs about Baptism, Church, ministry, and vocation. I challenge laypeople also to look critically at our operative beliefs about Baptism, Church, ministry, and vocation.

In the St. Gabriel's System, we find ourselves working together toward a common goal—the care of the young men with whom we work. Is this restricted to a working relationship between professionals, between 7 and 4, and easily defined by a job description and a paycheck every two weeks?

Each person in the System should question if he/she is content with what he/she has. Are we passive people who accept what happens and shrug and let life go on? Perhaps you have been tempted to want more/something else, but you haven't articulated what it is or envisioned what you want it to be. Responding to changes within the Church, the numbers of lay men and women working in the Brothers' Schools have increased dramatically during the past 25 years. No longer can laity docilely look for guidance and control. We must all join together and redefine our beliefs, our roles, our future. Obviously, something is happening in our Society, in our Church, and in our System. Apologies to Hallmark, but do we care enough to want the very best?

The questions I pose have no answers (easy or not) at present, but I would like to join with others to start to formulate questions and to join in the search for new directions in the future. If you see merit in a fuller association with the Christian

Brothers, if you feel a desire just to learn more about how this association might impact your life and your work, I invite you to reflect on your present experience and join in a reflective process common to our experiences.

Will you join with those who are interested to initiate a dialogue to formulate what form Association might take today and tomorrow—to explore what the contemporary expression of Association could be in the education and formation of our students? John Baptist de La Salle teaches us to always look ahead, to never stop looking for new ways of meeting new challenges: a Lasallian is creative. He calls upon us to examine our history, culture, and spiritual life with a sharp and critical eye, so as to be able to devise appropriate solutions to problems: a Lasallian is a realist and has the courage of his/her convictions.

We are not unique. There are movements like this all over the world, and each association has evolved in accordance with the needs, desires, and wishes of the people involved. I would suggest that any gathering must be founded upon real dialogue. This cannot be one-way communication (either way). We must be open to changes in our lives based on this open dialogue. I hesitate to say that both sides must be equally open, because that presupposes an “us—them” mentality, and I think that is the first baggage that has to go. (I’m not even sure if I am an ‘us’ or a ‘them’!)

Possibly the most difficult question: Are we willing to pray together—to share our spiritual search and to look to the Scriptures for knowledge, for inspiration, for strength, for courage? Do we want to continue, expand, or simply try to maintain the status quo?

Redefining Association will not be easy, but I invite those of you who are interested to join in the search for a form of asso-

ciation which reflects our identity as members of the St. Gabriel's System. Our work proves that we are people of enormous talent and goodwill, and if we so desire, we can begin to define our own identity and aims as Lasallians for the 1990s and beyond.

In the best Lasallian tradition, let's get together and share another meal and begin our journey toward this new Association. If you are interested, please call me at DelVoc, and we'll set up a meeting date. I'll even bring the lasagna.

With those words, Dot ushered in an adventure for the Brothers and colleagues of St. Gabriel's System who answered her call. For more than thirteen years, the Lasallian group that emerged from Dot's talk has met for prayer, study, fellowship, lasagna, and much more. The size and composition of the group often varies. A committed core group of about fifteen often struggled in the beginning with what to “name” the group and how to avoid any semblance of exclusivity. Spouses were welcomed from the start, and they were the ones who often asked the hard questions about ministry and association.

Brothers and colleagues in ministry to the needy students of the St. Gabriel's System began to feel energized as they discovered and rediscovered great wealth in the wisdom of John Baptist de La Salle. Reading the books, viewing the tapes, listening to the guests, and discussing the questions, all learned together about the material and about each other.

Meetings have taken place in the Brothers' residences and in the homes of colleagues. Facilitators, dates, places vary, but an obvious, serendipitous bond has formed. Participants have recognized the importance of the meetings for enriching the ministry. A highlight each year is a Sunday retreat at Daylesford Abbey in Paoli, PA, always planned with a concern to include everyone who might be interested.

When a Brother in the group became a founder at San Miguel School, Camden, NJ, it

was natural and delightful to include the San Miguel staff in the meetings. And whether by cause or effect, or not, new opportunities for service came to those who met regularly: a director of the System, an affiliated member of the Christian Brothers, a component principal, and several LLI graduates have emerged. In addition, new life has arrived in the persons of enthusiastic Lasallian volunteers.

It is true that as time passes and commitments increase, the scheduling of meetings has become more difficult, but Dot Clark's original call still resonates, and happily, there are still a few meetings a year.

The generosity and faithfulness of the Christian Brothers and colleagues continue. That combination, along with the hospitality of Paul and Dot Clark, the openness to spouses, the flexibility of times and places, the prayer, the study, and the ultimate focus on improving the ministry for the sake of the students, has worked for more than thirteen years. And you should taste Dot's lasagna!



This article is adapted from *Five Essays on Lasallian Lay Association* (Adamstown, MD: Baltimore District, 2004). Ann M. Cahill has been teaching at St. Gabriel's Hall in Audubon, PA, for the past twenty-five years. She lives in nearby Phoenixville with her husband, Jim. Ann is a graduate of the Lasallian Leadership Institute.