

# “Were not our hearts on fire?”

## Association and the Role of the Christian Brothers

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Once Jesus left the two disciples whom he met on the road to Emmaus, it dawned on them how they missed his stories, speeches, and lessons. They looked one another in the eye:

“Were not our hearts burning. . . ?” So they set out at once and returned to Jerusalem, where they found gathered together the eleven and those with them who were saying, “The Lord has truly been raised and has appeared to Simon!” Then the two recounted what had taken place on the way. . . . (Lk 24:32–35)

This ought to be our stance as Christian Brothers. We ought to set out at once in search of our colleagues and tell the story of our fraternal association and our encounter with Christ: how that close encounter has transformed us and fuels us with zeal for our mission. When we arrive, we shouldn’t be surprised to find the rest of our company sharing stories of their encounter with Christ and their zeal for the mission!

Brothers and Lasallians (a term that embraces all ministers in the educational community organized around and inspired by the story of Saint La Salle) are drawing the blueprint for a new kind of association that is rooted in these one-on-one encounters with Christ and the mission. As a Christian Brother, it seems to me that whatever definition we ultimately arrive at for association will depend in large part on the stories we, as Brothers, tell. After all, stories

spark an instant intimacy between the narrator, the narrative, and the listener. As they address this new century’s questions about our educational ministry, all Lasallians need our “Brother” stories like a newborn needs its mother’s milk.

It strikes me that Saint La Salle’s discernment style can serve as a story-rich model for all Lasallians, including the Brothers, to define association for today. Our Founder’s “double contemplation” was a Petri dish of experience and prayer: he knew the despair of the children of the artisans and the poor families in his time, and his relationship with God was steeped in contemplative prayer. This prayerful interface—knowing God’s desire that all are saved and the dead-end existence of poor kids—led our Founder to cooperate with God in founding the Christian Schools, and, of course, to bring together a community of like-minded men.

The first step in this spiritual dialectic is to tag the events, currents, and movements that are today’s “signs of the times.” I offer you my humble attempt to identify a short list:

(1) “By now it is clear . . . that there are no longer enough priests to celebrate Mass in many parishes. In rural areas and in the poorer neighborhoods of the great cities, parishes are being closed not only for economic reasons but also because priests cannot be found to serve as pastors.” (Willard Jabusch, *America*, May 12, 2003)

There are now more lay pastoral ministers (30,000) in the parishes than active diocesan priests (27,000). Eighty percent of them are

women; over two-thirds are working full time, and half of them feel they have received a call from God.

(2) "Recruit as energetically as possible; define the priesthood or religious life in whatever unambiguous, privileged, or heroic terms one chooses, and still the most that can be expected is a leveling off of the declining numbers, primarily of priests and men's religious orders, but with no possibility of catching up with the Catholic population growth or restoring the old near monopoly on leadership." (Peter Steinfels, *A People Adrift: A Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America* [2003], 327)

(3) Youth feel a disconnect in our land of milk and money, a culture filled with double meanings and mixed messages about what life is for. The zest with which our young people pursue the American ideal of *happiness* is suffocating the longer, slower, biblical pilgrimage to *meaning*.

(4) Justice Anne M. Burke of Illinois, interim chairwoman of the lay National Review Board appointed by the U. S. bishops to monitor church compliance with their *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*, said that any efforts to replace independent oversight with a return to self-monitoring could endanger credibility with the laity. "I have news for them. It's not their church. It's our church," she said. "The church belongs to all of us." (*America*, May 17, 2004)

(5) Eighteen per cent of the Catholic school population attends Catholic schools. Forty years ago, it was forty-seven per cent. The decrease is not because secular humanism has a better game plan. If there is a single reason, it is because many of our schools are too expensive and out of reach of the non-scholarship poor.

(6) The San Miguel and Cristo Rey networks that are rising like Ezekiel's vision of dry bones in the desert feature middle and high schools that target poor and marginalized youth and minimize tuition through donations, grants, and internship programs.

(7) The Signum Fidei movement has sprouted in our Region after taking root in the

Philippines and in Ecuador, for example. This movement grows out of a desire to live the evangelical itinerary of Saint La Salle in authentic ways.

The next step in the dialectic is to bring faith into dialogue with the raw material of experience. This is a tough challenge in personal discernment, let alone a communal one. The communal effort means acknowledging that there is no single faith expression, that it is presumptuous to claim to know the mind of God. Even so, our discernment is authentic because we have a dynamic tradition. This tradition is clear: we give divine traction to our merely human projects when we "look upon everything with the eyes of faith, do everything in view of God, and attribute all to God" (*Rule*, art. 5).

Again, I offer a short list of "signs of faith":

(1) My contemplation has led me to an unshakable sense that God wants people to know his mercy and justice, to be saved, and that the Christian School is one of the most dynamic and life-giving instruments of his love.

(2) God desires that salvation, eternal and temporal, be accessible. "Every culture needs to be evangelized" (*Rule*, art. 18).

(3) "The spiritual gifts which the Church has received in St. John Baptist de La Salle go far beyond the confines of the Institute which he founded. The Institute sees the existence of the various Lasallian movements as a grace from God renewing its own vitality." (*Rule*, art. 146)

(4) God "desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4).

The fruit of this discernment in which we contemplate the signs (of the times and of faith) is a holy agenda for an association for mission. As a Brother, I would like to issue a call for concrete initiatives to help *animate* this holy agenda. First, we Brothers need to acknowledge that the transmission of the faith in the school setting is more and more in the hands of a

different group of artisans. These Lasallians are not mere apprentices; they are journeymen intent on mastering the trade—the trade of cooperating with God in making the school a saving place. Lasallian leadership means a new infrastructure. The spiritual and practical formation and certification for faculty, paralleling that received in our training as Brothers, is necessary.

Second, to the degree possible, we need to invest a disproportionate amount of resources in the care and nurturance of our principals and presidents.

Third, we must continue to create vibrant collaborations in answer to Proposition 5 of the 43rd General Chapter. The Institute mandated that in each District “the Brothers and their Associates create a structure . . . responsible for the Lasallian educational mission, in which all participate with deliberative vote.” Full Lasallian participation at the local and the regional level requires our support.

The Long Island–New England District and the Midwest District have a *Mission and Ministry Council*; Baltimore has a *Mission Council*, and New York has a *Lasallian Ministry Board*. These boards and councils deal with matters such as the sponsorship of Lasallian schools by the District; the Lasallian formation of teachers, administrators, and board members; the support of and evaluation of the Lasallian mission and charism in schools; and networking among schools in the District.

We Brothers have a knee-jerk sensitivity to any comparison with priests. We don’t fancy being tagged clerics, or worse, clerical! Yet I think we are faced with the same questions that Peter Steinfeld poses:

Do [today’s] priests understand ministry as an individual effort that is ‘theirs’ to dispense, or as a community effort that they lead? Is their task primarily to bring priestly ministry themselves to people in need, or to build up a ministering community? Do they tend to be solo ‘doers,’ rather than ‘animators’ of others’ gifts?

(*A People Adrift*, 322)

I believe our answers express the heart of a new call to an expanded sense of association. God has led us to see that there is a larger educational community than the Brothers of the Christian Schools and that this community needs our spiritual wisdom and pastoral direction. It is my sense that God is inviting us more and more into a ministry of “animation leadership.”

If we believe, as Saint La Salle recounts in *Memorandum on the Beginnings*, that God is guiding all things with wisdom and serenity, perhaps God is leading us, as Saint La Salle was led, “in an imperceptible way and over a long period of time, so that one commitment led to another in a way that I [we] did not foresee in the beginning.” If so, may our response be enthusiastic!

On a personal note, this divine invitation and these needs have dramatically influenced the evolution of my consecrated life. If asked ten years ago, I would have said that my vow of association is an act of self-donation: “*Domine, opus tuum.*” [“Lord, the work is yours.”] I vow to give my heart, mind, body, and soul to your work—and *to support those who share this vow*. Today, my evolved definition would be more inclusive: *to support those who share this mission*. My life has a new imperative because there is a new community in my life: the educational community of Lasallians who share my faith and zeal for the mission.

This brings me back to the imperative of sharing the story of our fraternal association and our encounter with Christ in the Lasallian community. Our “animation leadership” includes conceiving and creating more opportunities to tell stories that celebrate and honor cooperating with God for the salvation of souls. The Brothers’ cup of tradition runneth over. Books, how-to manuals, dossiers, and documents have their place in transmitting this tradition, to be sure, but it is the story that transforms. Let us re-commit ourselves to sharing the story!

One of my spiritual mentors, Henri Nouwen, has the privilege of the last word. In

his reflection on the disciples in Emmaus and Jerusalem following their encounter with Christ, he could well be writing of Christian Brothers and Lasallians:

We are sent to teach, to heal, to inspire, and to offer hope to the world-not as the exercise of our unique skill, but as the expression of our faith that all we have to give comes from him who brought us together.

*(With Burning Hearts, 87-88)*



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