

# Images of Association: A Personal Reflection

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## Introduction

The Brothers gladly associate lay persons with them in their educational mission. (*Rule*, article 17).

The above quote is my opening remark as I share my personal thoughts and reflections on the perspective of Association in the Lwanga District of Africa within the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, also known as the De La Salle Christian Brothers.

I look at Lasallian Association as a necessary end rather than a contract between the Brothers and the Lay Partners. Viewed that way, Association becomes a communion of people animated by the Lasallian charism and committed to the educational service of the poor. This communion is centralized by charism and commitment to a common Mission whose right place is the school, although not exclusively.

There have been difficulties and challenges within the concept of association. The most apparent of these difficulties include “lack of Brothers” (the number seems to be dwindling annually) and “loss of Identity” (What is the difference between a Brother and a Layperson in the Mission?). In North America and Europe, for example, we can talk of an age problem and the lack of new vocations, while in Africa and Asia, we can talk of age-gap differences, indigenous and expatriate differences.

All these need to be addressed so that Association becomes a convergence rather than

divergence point in the Mission. The big question here is: How do we address these pertinent challenges without jeopardizing the religious vocation and the consecrated life of the Brothers? There is a need to create a clear balance between Brothers and Laypeople, just as Mother Earth has maintained centrifugal and centripetal forces to justify the gravitational pull.

Allow me try the figurative image in my mind. While one force tends to move away from the center, the other moves to the inside. The Mission in this image would be the gravitational force, which is at the center of the Institute.

The Brothers will play the role of the centrifugal force moving to the outside, where they find possible Collaborators, Partners, and Associates (CPA) mixed together in an apostolate. Due to the horizontal movement of CPA and Brothers (interaction, formation, and influence of one another), a centripetal movement will develop where the Associates will be pulled very close to the center, Partners not so far from the center, and Collaborators will still be deciding on the surface whether to respond to the Centripetal pull (the beckoning of the Mission).

The vertical movements of centrifugal and centripetal, accompanied by the horizontal movement of interaction, will produce the poles of Association that will be in agreement and very distinct. It is because of these poles that we will be able to categorize the laypeople as Collaborators, Partners, and Associates. The Association can never be stable, and therefore a

certain balance has to be maintained, however escalating. The balance will be maintained through a distinct structure of formation and transformation. That is what De La Salle did in his times, in the seventeenth century.

### **Briefly. . . .**

De La Salle and his early Brothers initiated a movement between 1680 and 1690, which is being shared right now with laypeople, irrespective of religious and philosophical beliefs. History has never been part of my leisure, but for purposes of my readers, I will borrow from a few years:

De La Salle renounced his canonry and his material goods in order to strengthen the community that was to serve the poor (1682–84). Between 1684 and 1686, the community of early Brothers felt that identity was necessary and therefore a need for a name, habit, and regulations. Due to these needs, a vow of obedience was made in 1686 so that cohesion of the group for the service of the poor was maintained.

After this commitment, the maturity of the group was clear, and association for the educational needs of the abandoned children (far from salvation) became a necessary end for the group. It is because of this end that the early Brothers found themselves part and parcel of a history of Salvation, having some form of identity, having a communion with one another, and engaged in a ministry that places them squarely in the hands of Divine Providence.

Looking at the group between 1686 and 1690, one would be tempted to say that the early Brothers were in their heydays. I am not qualified to go deeper into that fact, but in the language of a layman, I would be tempted to think that all was not well with this group. It had to survive through inconstancy, fatigue, hidden agenda, lack of internal commitment, and so on. Sometime in 1690, half of the Brothers left, and the group was threatened with total extinction. I would not call this a heyday moment but a time of trial and great tribulations. Thank God, because of the seed of associ-

ation, De La Salle and two of his Brothers decided to publicly commit themselves to the Mission in a more profound manner in 1691, and again with ten more of the Brothers in 1694, in an heroic manner—hence the Heroic Vow! The balance was, therefore, maintained in an unstable situation.

### **The Seed of Association**

The above reality is the birth of the “seed of Association.” The Brothers call it “vow of association,” but I call it the seed of association because I see three very essential elements in it. It is like flowers had to wither and die in order to produce the seeds.

- One, the seed is born out of confidence in God, that God was all along involved in the process (good farmers always do that).

- Two, the early Brothers were committing themselves to one another so that the individuality built the communion.

- Thirdly, there was the pulling force whose explanation can be traced back to the Mission, or better still, “Commitment to the Mission of Education.” The pulling force is the bond that was established between the community of the Brothers and the Mission of Education. It is for the glory of God, meant to unite the members to remain in the society and within the Christian schools. During this time we see De La Salle, the first Brothers, several laymen, and other religious, all committing themselves to God, to the Community, and to the children of the poor artisans. They all felt called by God, by Jesus Christ, by the Church, and by the Institute, but at the same time sent accordingly to carry out God’s work in the spirit of faith and zeal.

*Vita Consecrata* 54 and 55 sees some change in the Church. The Church no longer belongs to the clergy (there was a time the Church was seen to be hanging in the clouds and the faithful had to tie ropes around the Church to pull it down to the Earth). The Church is a communion whose members must unite, cooperate, and collaborate in order to

share their God-given gifts as they participate in the mission of the Church.

For this reason, therefore, many congregations and institutes have realized that their charisms can be shared with the laity. The laity is, therefore, invited to share more intensively in the spirituality and mission of these congregations and institutes. That is a new chapter, which promises hope and direction as the religious and laity are now developing a special bond for a common goal. I am convinced that such new experiences would give rise to the spread of a fruitful spirituality beyond the confines of any religious congregation or any institute for that matter. The laywomen and laymen will experience the spirit of evangelical counsels, get courage to live and bear witness to their spirit of transforming the world for the better.

In the Institute of De La Salle Brothers, for example, there has been a growing awareness of this new communion and sharing the Mission. The *Rule*, article 17, clearly shows the way:

Ever since the time of their foundation, the Brothers have contributed to the promotion of the Christian laity, especially among those educators who want their professional work to be a form of Gospel ministry.

The *Declaration* (46.3) tries to strengthen what the *Rule* has stated:

The school will be molded into a community only through a community of teachers rich in diversity and the unity of its members. For this reason the Brothers are happy to collaborate with lay teachers. . . . The Brothers act in such a way as to guarantee that the lay teachers are involved in the whole life of the school: with the catechesis, apostolic movements, extra-curricular activities, as well as in administration and matters of policy.

There is a general consensus that all of us (Brothers and Partners) are working for the

same educational goal. At this stage the laypeople are collaborators with the Brothers, but with time some will find themselves having particular views on faith by which they see themselves as being called to the Mission as a way of life and as a vocation, and therefore be Partners and Associates.

Brother John Johnston, former Superior General, stated in his Pastoral Letter of 1 January 1987 that laypeople

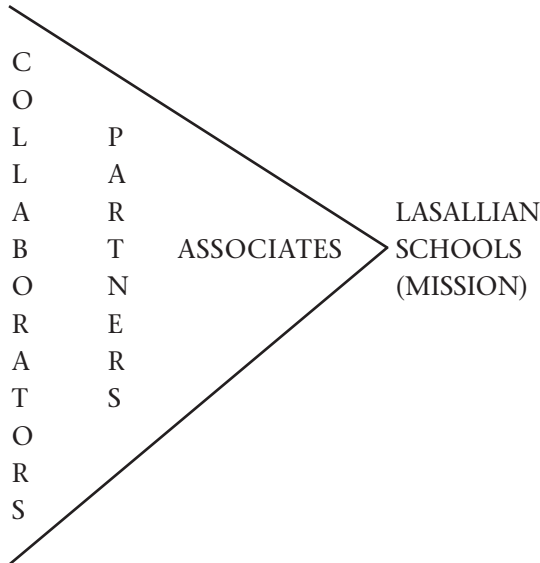
take their place as “full partners”—and we Brothers gladly associate them with us in our mission. We accept that from now on our schools will not be “Brothers’ Schools,” animated by the Brothers’ community with secondary collaboration of lay teachers, parents, and students. They will be instead “Lasallian Schools,” schools animated by Lasallian educative communities of faith “within which the apostolic activity of the Brothers’ community takes place” (*Rule*, 17a).

(*The Destiny of the Institute: Our Responsibility*, 29).

Lasallian association brings people (teachers, educators, learners, former students, parents, former Brothers, and voluntary helpers) together. But we have to understand that there are different levels of belonging in this association. There are those who are just Collaborators, while others are Partners, and still others are Associates. All these depend on the understanding and openness to the goals and objectives of the Lasallian Mission.

Our Mission is a mission of proclaiming the Gospel of the Lord, which we receive in Baptism, which we receive from the Institute, and which we hold as a community of faith in a specific apostolate. We proclaim our Christianity and Lasallianism communally through our faith. Our faith community, therefore, focuses on God, Jesus Christ, and John Baptist de La Salle, and so we call this the Lasallian spirituality. From this dimension there are those who are more associated than the others, and hence

the levels of Collaboration, Partnership, and Association (CPA). A simple diagram could easily demonstrate these commitment levels toward the Mission.



As we continue to wait for the “Associated for the Educational Service of the Poor” Commission to complete its work, and as we continue to reflect on this new dimension of Brothers working together with other people (who are not Brothers) to accomplish their Mission, we in Lwanga District of Africa could begin thinking in terms of being part of the larger Lasallian Family. This Lasallian Family could be looked at from the following points of view—the CPA (Collaborators, Partners, Associates) in clarification.

**Collaborators** are women and men who have committed themselves to work with the De La Salle Brothers but only for a short period of time. They have a limited understanding of the Mission and vision of the Institute. Their main level of commitment is based on their professionalism. Earning a living may be the basic level of commitment.

**Partners** are women and men who have a commitment to work with, learn about, and understand the De La Salle Brothers. Their commitment goes beyond the professionalism level, as they see themselves as part and parcel mem-

bers of the Lasallian Mission. They are engaged in the formation process of becoming associates. Self-discovery in view of the Mission may be the ultimate level of commitment. The Partners could decide to leave the Association after some time of faith experience with the Brothers.

**Associates** are women and men who have made a total commitment in some form of lay association with the De La Salle Brothers. They see themselves as ministers who are involved in a vocation of teaching, and not just a mere job within the apostolates. They are open to deeper formation and understanding about the vision and Mission of the Institute. Some may form groups that are recognized by the Institute of Brothers. Mission and vision of De La Salle become parts of their secular life.

They identify themselves with the dreams and aspirations of the District and/or the Institute. Although they are never consecrated, their understanding and commitment are parallel to the consecrated life of any religious life.

Our understanding of the CPA could be demonstrated with the simple idea of a “shoe.” If we take the shoe as the Mission of the Institute, which is given to us (laypeople) by the Brothers, we will accept it on a number of bases: the shoe could be fitting, large, or small in size.

If it is fitting, we laypeople should accept, wear, and fit in the shoe for the long journey of Association. If it is large in size, we need to give ourselves time and disposition so that we grow into the size through the process of Lasallian formation into the Mission. However, if the shoe is small in size, we have no choice but to leave it alone for someone else who fits or is willing to fit into it. We should not tear the shoe into pieces in order to fit in a foot that is too large for the shoe.

The Mission of the Brothers has been offered to the laypeople as a shoe to internalize and identify with in order to partake in the long journey of availing salvation to the young poor and marginalized who are far from salvation.

The acceptance of the Mission should not be seen as automatic, because just like the size of the shoe, it will depend on a number of factors. The factors could be from either the laypeople or the Brothers. The factors could be traced back to the 43rd General Chapter, 2000. The five elements of association as stipulated in Circular 447 are the guiding principles while we categorize the members of the above Lasallian Family:

- A vocation inspired by the charism of Saint John Baptist de La Salle and his values.
- A life of faith, which discovers God in everyday life, understood in the light of Scripture and, for persons of other religions, in the light of their own sacred texts.
- A community experience of some form or other suited to the identity of its members.
- A mission of some duration, which associates persons with the educational service of the poor.
- An openness of mind, which makes it possible to see beyond the individual and her/his immediate environment.

To enter the levels of Partnership and Association, a collaborator requires a good Lasallian formation, especially when the foot (layperson's understanding) is too small for the shoe (mission). This Lasallian formation will be the establishment of what I would call "Roots of Association." Through this formation the collaborator will strengthen commitment, shared spirit, communion, and mission. It is a lengthy process, a personal journey, and a conversion experience through which the individual will have an awareness of being called to a mission. For the Lwanga District, I have recommended the following:

### **Possibilities**

- A need to set in motion a process leading people to make a personal commitment to association.
- A need to associate actively, passionately, but also patiently, knowing that "Rome was not built in a day."

- A need to develop a sense of belonging to the Mission of the Institute in a specific apostolate, as in a school.
- A need to have a coordinated and complete structure of formation that focuses on awareness about Lasallian Educational Mission and associating in a community of faith right from the grass roots.
- A need to develop practical structures that conform to the nature of association, putting in mind that the District is varied in people and culture.
- A need to have guidelines on the composition of "Association," having a minimum set of clear goals that are agreed upon by all, are practical, dynamic, flexible, and adaptable, so that they suit the local situations and times. These goals must be emanating from "the educational mission to the young poor and marginalized." These goals must be simple and practical for people to understand
- A need to develop signs and symbols of belonging to an Association. These signs and symbols must be clear to those around us. The apostolate must be clear to the outsiders, even without our own explanations.

De La Salle wrote:

Union in a community is a precious gem, which is why Our Lord so often recommended it to his apostles before he died. If we lose this, we lose everything. Preserve it with care, therefore, if you want your community to survive.

*(Meditations, 91.2, for 30 December)*

Our understanding in the Lwanga District of Africa of this new reality demands a tremendous change of mentality among both Brothers and laypeople so that "Shared Mission and Association" can be accepted as a gift of God that commits all of us in it for the good of the common goal, which is "The Christian and Human Education for the Poor and Marginalized." This is going to be a challenging mentality change, especially for the Brothers, who will no longer consider themselves as the only caretakers of

the Lasallian Mission of Education, even though I still consider them as the Heart, Memory, and Guarantors of the same Mission. I think that for us laypeople, the mentality change will make us more co-responsible, as we will see clearly that:

God is calling each one according to his or her own vocation, to accomplish together the mission confided to St. John Baptist de La Salle and to the Institute he founded.

*(Circular 435, 13)*

Lwanga District of Africa is relatively very young, as it was put in place in 1997, although prior to the current structure, the five countries that now constitute the District (Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa) have always supported and encouraged in reality the concept of Association in the various apostolates throughout the District. Historically, each of the ministries has had some laypeople involved in the Mission for more than forty years. But for the last fifteen or so years, the number of local Brothers joining the Mission of Lasallian Education within the apostolates has been increasing, and for this reason we have created a process of education to ensure that each of our Brothers and laypeople understands and appreciates the role of a consecrated Brother and that of the layperson in the Church and in the Institute.

We recognize that each of us, Brother or Layperson, has a different vocation as our individual commitment, but we join together when it comes to the Mission of Education. Our goal in Lwanga District is one of Collaboration, Partnership, and Association (CPA), which can be interpreted as one of understanding the Mission of Human and Christian Education, one of appreciating our different vocational calls and at the same time joining together in creating a Lasallian spirit in the apostolates that we serve in the District.

We see Association as “coming together” of people of diverse vocations who through the Mission are unified by what they bring to the Mission. We appreciate the variety of contribu-

tions that each one of us brings to the Mission: whether in catechesis, apostolic organizations, extra-curricular activities, or administrative positions, all are ONE IN DIVERSITY.

The understanding of Association in Lwanga District is strengthened by the realization that whether we are a Brother or a Layperson, an administrator or a teacher, a faculty member or non-teaching staff, God is mysteriously working in, through, and for us without our knowledge but at the same time with our cooperation. Working together for a common mission, we are exposed to certain essential values that influence little by little our attitudes, aspirations, and decisions. That way, we may recognize a change in the meaning of the work that we do and see the Hand of God in our works.

### **Conclusion**

My clear conviction is that Saint John Baptist de La Salle was led to found a community of men who were enlightened by God to have a share in his plan of salvation for those marginalized and neglected. They associated together to respond to the needs of young people who were poor and far from any form of salvation. Just as De La Salle founded a living community of Brothers with whom he shared his apostolic ideals, the Brothers today are sharing the same ideals of education with the laypeople who are willing to experience and share the Mission of the Institute in a deeper way. The sharing of the Mission is a fact, which needs not be argued about, because the schools that were known as Brothers’ schools are today called Lasallian schools, for obvious reasons.

The idea of Association has to do with “catching a glimpse of the vision and running after it.” Also, it has to do with seeing a star far in the horizon and following that star unquestionably. This is challenging and sometimes seems unreasonable, because it implies an adventure into the unknown (Abraham in the Old Testament did the same when he was called by God to leave his homeland to an unknown

land), but at the same time it is a renewal process for which a sense of revitalization is needed.

To be a member of any movement, commitment to that movement is one crucial requisite that needs safeguarding. The movement of Association is a response to the call of sacramental life of service to others. The members of the movement hear and listen to the story of the Founder with a personal but also communal attention. The members realize that they have a call that is not only an affirmation but also a challenge, a privilege, and a responsibility given by the Church and the Institute. What they hear and listen to is something like this:

In our lives, there are special, powerful moments when the past takes on a new meaning, the events of the present have a stronger impact, and the future is faced with renewed determination. We would like to share with you a conviction we reached as a result of our interaction, namely, that God is calling each one according to his or her own vocation to accomplish together the mission confided to Saint John Baptist de La Salle and to the Institute he founded. In light of the experience of the last twenty years, the 42nd General Chapter reaffirms the irreplaceable role of those men and women—laypeople, priests, religious—who carry out this mission. The Institute brings them together to work in association “to give a human and Christian education to the young, especially the poor” (*Rule*, art. 3).

Today the Mission is not in the hands of the Brothers alone: it is in the unified commitment of all who share in the Lasallian pedagogy—a communal participation in giving education to the young poor. To be able to associate, both Brothers and laypeople need to realize that they are being challenged to allow a tremendous change in their thinking and attitude toward their work of teaching and educating. They are both being called to openness,

detachment, and a spirit of letting go of the past. This concept, however, is easier said than done, because it implies a tremendous change of head, heart, and way of approaching issues within the Mission.

I am not suggesting in any way that the members of this Association have the uniformity and commonality of identical twins. I clearly realize the diversity of membership, as there are different levels of commitment, different inclinations, different vocations, and different lifestyles. The implications that I am talking about involve an inherent obligation to work not just as one mass of people or not simply to work together, but to work “in union with” the School, Sector, District, and Institute as a whole. It is the responsibility of the members to stabilize the association at all costs in order to give status and meaning to that Association.

The Association must develop into a real family where members associate themselves for a common goal. Like camels who never give up life in the inhospitable deserts, the members in this Association need to keep together and energize each other in work, recreation, and general life, so that whatever is private is sacrificed for the Mission. There is a great diversity of persons in each of the apostolates, yet all of them are united in communion and in the Mission. Some are consecrated for life to the ministry and mission of the Church, while others are committed with greater or lesser intensity, whether married or not. Others may be simply supporting the charism of the Founder. The commonality that I see in this Association is the affective support and solidarity that exist within the apostolates. In difficult times and when suffering is present, the members of this Association stay together, regardless of their various social and cultural backgrounds. This is a concrete example of association for the Mission among the consecrated and the laity working together in a specific apostolate.

It is interesting to note that this association is God-willed, because the initiative and the ways of participating in the Mission are directed and guided through divine intervention.

It is God who calls and sends the members to the Mission. The Association will survive because the Spirit who distributes the gifts animates it and is made manifest in the members for the common utility. The dynamism of participating in the association is found in the commitment to the ministry of teaching and other apostolic works.

My last words come as my personal belief that if we really believe in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, "The Spirit of God will lead us to where we did not plan to go!" This way, Association seems far, yet near, and real like that line of horizon in the blue skies.

SAINT JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE, PRAY FOR US!

SAINT CHARLES LWANGA, PRAY FOR US!

LIVE, JESUS, IN OUR HEARTS, FOREVER!

### **For Further Reading**

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